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The Soleimani Doctrine: Network-Centric Security and the Hybrid Paradigm in West Asia

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Abstract. This article conceptualizes the *Soleimani Doctrine* as an emergent security paradigm in West Asia, using a qualitative, interpretive research approach. While dominant analyses interpret Iran's regional strategy primarily within realist and state-centric frameworks, this study adopts a theory-guided conceptual analysis to reconstruct the organizing logic of the doctrine as a network-centric and hybrid security model. The central research question examines how the Soleimani Doctrine is constituted analytically, and what are the core pillars that structure its operational logic in relation to complex regional threats. Drawing on academic literature, institutional documents, and public discourse as analytical data, the article identifies three interrelated pillars: (1) a network power architecture for coordinating state and non-state actors; (2) identity-based discourse production as a mechanism of transnational cohesion and legitimation; and (3) operational risk management incorporating hybrid and asymmetric practices. Rather than assessing empirical effectiveness, the study demonstrates how these pillars function together as an internally coherent security framework that generates strategic depth beyond conventional state-based models. By offering an analytically explicit reconstruction of the Soleimani Doctrine, the article contributes to discussions within Critical Security Studies and non-Western international relations by illustrating an alternative mode of security governance grounded in regional practices and contextual logics.

Key words: Qasem Soleimani, hybrid warfare, Iran-aligned security network, strategic depth

Authors' contributions. A. Zareei: development of the research design and methodology; literature review; collection, systematization, and analysis of research materials; drafting and revision of the manuscript. A.S. Niyazi: initial research conceptualization; conducting the preliminary study; review of the manuscript and substantive comments on its content. Both authors read and approved the final version of the article.

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«Доктрина Сулеймани»: сетцентрическая безопасность и гибридная парадигма в Западной Азии

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Аннотация. Исследование посвящено рассмотрению «доктрины Сулеймани» как новой парадигмы безопасности в Западной Азии на основе качественного интерпретативного подхода. В отличие от преобладающих исследований, трактующих региональную стратегию Ирана преимущественно в рамках реалистических и государственно-центричных моделей, данная работа предлагает теоретически обоснованный концептуальный анализ, направленный на реконструкцию организационной логики доктрины как сетцентричной и гибридной модели безопасности. Центральный исследовательский вопрос состоит в том, каким образом формируется «доктрина Сулеймани» и какие ключевые элементы определяют ее операционную логику в условиях сложных региональных угроз. На основе академической литературы, институциональных документов и публичного дискурса выделено три взаимосвязанных компонента: (1) сетевая архитектура власти, обеспечивающая координацию государственных и негосударственных акторов; (2) формирование идентификационного дискурса как механизм транснациональной консолидации и легитимации; и (3) оперативное управление рисками, включающее гибридные и асимметричные практики. Не ставя целью оценку эмпирической эффективности данной модели, исследование показывает, как указанные компоненты образуют внутренне согласованную систему безопасности, способную обеспечивать стратегическую глубину за пределами традиционных государственно-центричных подходов. Предлагая аналитически конкретную реконструкцию «доктрины Сулеймани», статья вносит вклад в дискуссию в области критических исследований безопасности и международных отношений незападного мира, демонстрируя альтернативную модель управления безопасностью, основанную на региональных практиках и контекстуальной логике.

Ключевые слова: Касем Сулеймани, гибридная война, сеть безопасности, связанная с Ираном, стратегическая глубина

Вклад авторов. Зареи А.: разработка дизайна и методологии исследования; обзор научной литературы; сбор, систематизация и анализ исследовательских материалов; подготовка и доработка рукописи. Ниязи А.Ш.: формирование первоначальной концепции исследования; проведение предварительного исследования; прочтение рукописи и предоставление содержательных комментариев. Оба автора прочитали и одобрили окончательную версию статьи.

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Introduction

The security landscape of the Middle East in the 21st century has undergone a paradigm transformation, challenging the traditional international relations paradigms that were centered on the nation-state and the military balance of power. The emergence of non-state actors, the fluidity of national borders, and the complexity of hybrid threats, ranging from information warfare to psychological and

economic operations, have rendered classical security structures increasingly ineffective.¹

Against this turbulent backdrop, the Islamic Republic of Iran, under the command of General Qasem Soleimani, developed a strategy that not only responded to novel threats but also redefined the rules of the regional security game. This

¹ Global Strategies: Hybrid Warfare in the Middle East // LSE Ideas. 2017 (February). URL: <https://www.lse.ac.uk/ideas/Assets/Documents/reports/LSE-IDEAS-Hybrid-Warfare-in-the-Middle-East.pdf> (accessed: 05.10.2025). See also: (Hoffman, 2007).

strategy, referred to here as the *Soleimani Doctrine*, can be analyzed not merely as a military tactic, but as a network-centric security model that shifted the logic of power from symmetrical confrontation to asymmetrical, distributed, and network-based influence.²

In this context, and for the sake of conceptual precision, this article employs the term ‘complex regional threats’ to refer collectively to the interconnected challenges posed by takfiri non-state actors (such as ISIS³), extra-regional military interventions led by the United States, and the multi-layered hybrid operations conducted by Israel. Accordingly, the term ‘doctrine’ is used here to denote not only a system of conceptual views, but also the overarching set of the guiding principles and operational logics from which specific strategies emerge, clarifying why the Soleimani Doctrine is conceptualized as both a worldview and an actionable security framework.

The doctrine emerged as a proactive response to two major geopolitical shifts rooted in U.S. and Israeli grand strategies, both of which directly threatened Iran’s security and the regional balance of power. The first was the U.S.-led drive to reshape the regional order in the aftermath of the September 11, 2001 attacks. During this period, the ambitious “Greater Middle East”⁴ project was

articulated as a strategic framework (Daigle, 2017, pp. 758–765), and then-Secretary of State, Condoleezza Rice, promoted the “constructive chaos” doctrine to justify far-reaching transformations in the region.⁵ This approach culminated in the military invasions of Afghanistan (2001) and Iraq (2003) with the dual objective of geopolitical engineering and weakening the resistance infrastructure of rival states. These interventions had two strategic consequences for Iran’s national security: (1) geopolitical encirclement through the deployment of U.S. and NATO forces along Iran’s eastern and western borders, and (2) the managed collapse of central governments, creating vast security vacuums and unprecedented spaces for the growth of extremist non-state actors such as al-Qaeda⁶ and ISIS (banned in Russia) (Wehrey, 2014).

In this volatile environment, classical national defense structures, anchored in standing armies and fixed borders, proved grossly inadequate against fluid, transnational threats. Meanwhile, Israel’s security strategy, known as the “Campaign Between Wars,” added another layer of complexity by carrying out preemptive, targeted operations deep inside the strategic depth of Syria and Iraq. This strategy, aimed at disrupting the Iran-aligned network of state and non-state actors (commonly referred to as the “Resistance Axis”) command chains and logistics networks, combined cyber-attacks and psychological warfare, effectively shifting the battleground into the “grey zone,” where the distinction between war and peace becomes practically meaningless (Shelah & Valensi, 2023). Such multi-layered threats—an

² See: Soufan A. Qassem Soleimani and Iran’s Unique Regional Strategy // CTC Sentinel. November 2018. Vol. 11. Iss. 10. URL: <https://ctc.westpoint.edu/qassem-soleimani-irans-unique-regional-strategy/> (accessed: 05.10.2025); Brodsky J.M., Mansharof Y. Soleimani Birthed Iran’s Axis of Resistance, Ghaani Coordinated It // Middle East Institute. December 15, 2023. URL: <https://www.mei.edu/publications/soleimani-birthed-irans-axis-resistance-ghaani-coordinated-it> (accessed: 05.10.2025).

³ Hereinafter, an organization included in the Unified Federal List of Organizations, containing foreign and international organizations, recognized as terrorist in accordance with the legislation of the Russian Federation is mentioned.

⁴ Wittes T. C. The New U.S. Proposal for a Greater Middle East Initiative: An Evaluation // Saban Center for Middle East Policy at the Brookings Institution. May 10, 2004. URL: <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/the-new-u-s-proposal-for-a-greater-middle-east-initiative-an-evaluation/> (accessed: 05.10.2025). See also: (Daigle, 2017, pp. 758–765).

⁵ Rice C. The Promise of Democratic Peace // The Washington Post. December 10, 2005. URL: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/opinions/2005/12/11/the-promise-of-democratic-peace/72b0648b-50a0-4c6f-9956-e3dd3f4d572c/> (accessed: 05.10.2025).

⁶ Hereinafter, an organization included in the Unified Federal List of Organizations, containing foreign and international organizations, recognized as terrorist in accordance with the legislation of the Russian Federation is mentioned.

amalgam of military action, terrorism, information warfare, and economic sanctions—required a response calibrated to the same level of complexity and breadth.

Under these conditions, the Soleimani Doctrine emerged not as a reactive measure, but as a proactive *counter-doctrine*. By precisely understanding the changing nature of threats, it accepted the logic of the battlefield while turning the very tools of its adversaries against them. Instead of static border defense, the doctrine emphasized crisis management at the source; instead of striving for a symmetrical balance of power, it relied on asymmetrical balancing—transforming threats into opportunities to redefine Iran’s strategic depth.⁷

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretive research approach based on theory-guided conceptual analysis and documentary sources to examine the emergence and internal logic of the *Soleimani Doctrine* as a distinct security paradigm. The study seeks to address the following question: How was the Soleimani Doctrine assembled as an alternative security model, through which foundational pillars and organizing principles, and with what analytically observable implications for managing complex regional threats?

The central analytical proposition of the study is that the Soleimani Doctrine departs from classical state-centric security paradigms by

operationalizing a locally embedded, network-centric model based on three interrelated pillars:

1) a Network Power Architecture, which governs coordination across an ecosystem of state and non-state actors,

2) Identity Discourse Engineering, which constructs and stabilizes a transnational resistance-oriented identity through securitizing narratives, and

3) Operational Risk Management, which regulates escalation dynamics through hybrid and asymmetric practices. Beyond simply situating the doctrine as a context-specific response to regional insecurity, the article advances it as a conceptually coherent non-Western framework with wider analytical relevance for the study of security governance in unstable and conflict-prone regions.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative, interpretive research design based on theory-guided conceptual analysis to examine the Soleimani Doctrine as an emergent security paradigm rather than a formally codified military doctrine. This approach is suitable for analyzing security models that are practice-based, discursively constructed, and embedded in specific regional contexts (Creswell, 2013).

The analysis proceeds in three stages.

First, the doctrine is conceptually reconstructed through the identification of recurring patterns across strategic practices, institutional coordination, and public discourse associated with Iran’s regional security behavior during Qasem Soleimani’s tenure.

Second, these patterns are organized analytically into three core pillars: Network Power Architecture, Identity Discourse Engineering, and Operational Risk Management. Each pillar is treated as an analytical variable with observable qualitative indicators.

Third, the resulting framework is contextually situated through analytical comparison with dominant state-centric security paradigms in the

⁷ See: Bahman S. Kar-e bozorg-e Haj Qasem, *tabdil-e tahdid be forsat bud* [Hajj Qasem’s Great Work Was Turning Threats into Opportunities] // Khamenei.ir. January 2, 2021. (In Persian). URL: <https://farsi.khamenei.ir/others-dialog?id=46987> (accessed: 05.10.2025); Samavati S. Qasem Soleymani va omq-e estratezhik-e Iran dar mantagheh [Qasem Soleimani and Iran’s Strategic Depth in the Region] // Etamad Newspaper. 2022 (January 3). No. 17. (In Persian). URL: <https://www.etamadonline.com/%D8%A8%D8%AE%D8%B4-%D8%A7%D8%AC%D8%AA%D9%85%D8%A7%D8%B9%DB%8C-23/530306-%D9%82%D8%A7%D8%B3%D9%85-%D8%B3%D9%84%DB%8C%D9%85%D8%A7%D9%86%DB%8C-%D8%B9%D9%85%D9%82-%D8%A7%D8%B3%D8%AA%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%AA%DA%98%DB%8C%DA%A9-%D8%A7%DB%8C%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%86-%D8%AF%D8%B1-%D9%85%D9%86%D8%B7%D9%82%D9%87> (accessed: 05.10.2025).

Middle East to highlight its distinctive organizing logic rather than to claim empirical effectiveness.

The study relies on peer-reviewed academic literature, institutional and policy reports, and open-source documentary materials. Public statements by political and military actors are used exclusively as data for discourse analysis and are triangulated with independent academic and institutional sources, consistent with Critical Security Studies approaches (Buzan, Wæver & de Wilde, 1998; Balzacq, 2005).

The article does not aim at causal generalization or policy prescription. Instead, it advances an analytically coherent framework for understanding a specific model of security governance within a defined regional context.

Theoretical Framework

Analyzing the Soleimani Doctrine through the lens of traditional international relations theories, particularly structural realism, may illuminate certain aspects of geopolitical rivalry, but it fails to adequately explain the doctrine's primary sources of power, namely non-state actors, discursive cohesion, and hybrid operations. For this reason, the present study adopts a composite conceptual framework, viewing the Soleimani Doctrine as a complex system whose structure is network-based, whose source of cohesion is discursive and identity-driven, and whose operational logic is hybrid in nature.

a) Network Power

The concept of network power, as theorized by scholars such as Manuel Castells (2009a; 2009b) and Anne-Marie Slaughter (2009), represents a fundamental shift in the understanding of the nature and mechanisms of power in the contemporary international system. This paradigm demonstrates that, in the era of globalization and the information revolution, power has moved beyond hierarchical structures and direct state control over territorial domains, becoming organized in horizontal, networked forms.

Within this framework, power is exercised through the strategic control of key nodes and the management of vital flows across complex, multi-layered social, political, economic, and security networks (Kahler, 2009, pp. 15–23; Nye, 2011, pp. 113–139). These networks encompass a wide range of heterogeneous actors: from central governments and supranational institutions to non-governmental organisations (NGOs), local groups, political elites, and even social networks interconnected through complex flows of information, finance, logistics, ideology, and operations (Keck & Sikkink, 1998, pp. 8–25). Network power thus refers to a strategic actor's ability to design the architecture of these networks, shape their structure, manage their dynamics, and control their flows, enabling influence well beyond its material or conventional resources, and allowing it to pursue strategic objectives across local, regional, and transnational levels (Ronfeldt & Arquilla, 2001).

b) Critical Security Studies

Critical Security Studies (CSS), which emerged in the late 1980s and early 1990s, originating from the Copenhagen School and the seminal works of Barry Buzan, Ole Wæver, and Jaap de Wilde, offers a transformative approach to understanding the nature of security. Unlike traditional theories, which regard security as an objective, material condition, CSS reframes security as a *social, discursive, and historically constructed phenomenon* that is produced through linguistic and ideological processes (Buzan, Wæver & de Wilde, 1998).

Rather than focusing exclusively on *conventional military threats*, CSS emphasizes the complex process of securitization as its central analytic lens. Securitization is a discursive act whereby an actor, through language and “speech acts,” frames an issue or phenomenon as a perceived existential threat to a referent object. Once accepted by the audience, such claims legitimize extraordinary, non-routine measures to counter that threat (Balzacq, 2005).

CSS also stresses the pivotal role of identity and identity construction in shaping security perceptions, defining self/other boundaries, and forming alliances or rivalries (Campbell, 1998, pp. 8–35). Moreover, this school broadens the scope of security to encompass political, economic, social, and environmental dimensions, extending analysis from the individual to the systemic level (Buzan, Wæver & de Wilde, 1998, pp. 7–21).

From a CSS perspective, one can better understand how shared security discourses, convergent identity frames, and threat narratives can provide cohesion, legitimacy, and durability to a complex security structure—even without a single central government or formal hierarchical command. This makes CSS particularly effective for analyzing informal security networks and transnational coalitions.

c) Hybrid Warfare

The concept of hybrid warfare, introduced in the early 21st century by scholars, such as Frank Hoffman (2007), refers to the systematic combination of conventional and unconventional instruments across complex conflict environments. This approach emerged in response to the post-Cold War security transformations and the increasing prominence of non-traditional threats.

Hybrid warfare encompasses a broad spectrum of tactics and tools: from conventional military operations and guerrilla/irregular tactics to advanced cyber-attacks, information and cognitive warfare, full-spectrum psychological operations, the strategic use of economic instruments and diplomatic pressure, and even the integration of proxy forces and non-state actors. This multifaceted blend enables simultaneous operations across various levels of conflict and the systematic exploitation of adversary vulnerabilities in multiple domains.

The primary objective of hybrid warfare is to create deliberate ambiguity within the battlespace, confusing the adversary in identifying the nature of the threat and selecting an appropriate response,

while achieving long-term strategic goals at a significantly lower cost than traditional warfare and with reduced risk of direct escalation (Murray & Mansoor, 2012). This strategy also places special emphasis on narrative control and the battle of perceptions.

By design, hybrid warfare shifts strategic analysis away from direct, conventional battles into the ‘grey zones’ or ‘intermediate spaces’ where distinctions between war and peace, competition and cooperation, and state and non-state actors are intentionally blurred.⁸ This strategic ambiguity in these zones enables actors to operate while maintaining plausible deniability and avoiding full accountability.

Taken together, these three analytical tools enable us to examine the Soleimani Doctrine as an integrated system, in which the hardware (network architecture), software (discursive cohesion), and operating system (hybrid warfare) interact synergistically. This framework not only enhances our understanding of the doctrine in the Middle Eastern context, but also strengthens the potential for non-Western theorizing in global security studies.

Dissecting the Soleimani Doctrine

The Soleimani Doctrine, as a sophisticated strategy for confronting the multilayered challenges of the region, rests on three interlinked pillars, whose conceptual framework was outlined in the previous section. In practice, these pillars generated a localized yet innovative security model. The following sections examine each pillar individually, highlighting their mechanisms and functions in creating a dynamic and resilient form of strategic depth.

⁸ Schadlow N. The Problem with Hybrid Warfare // War on the Rocks. April 2, 2015. URL: <https://warontherocks.com/2015/04/the-problem-with-hybrid-warfare/> (accessed: 05.10.2025).

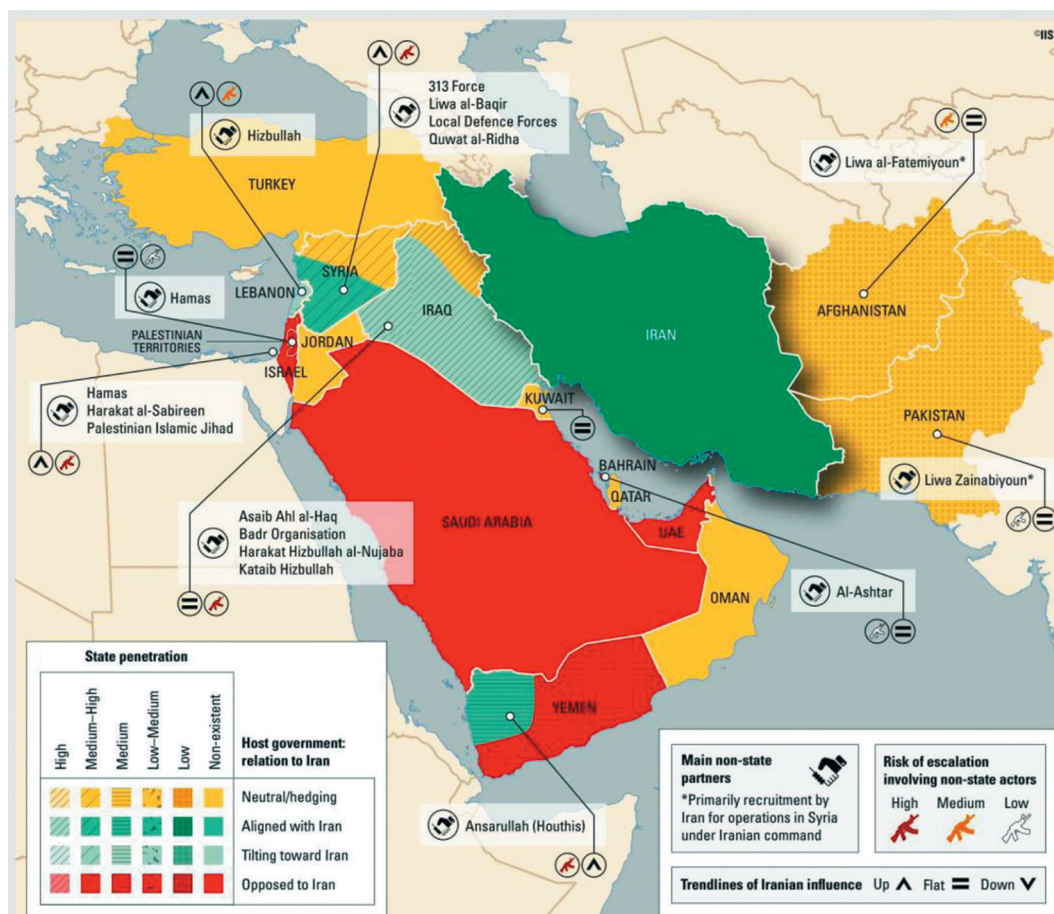


Figure 1. Iran's influence map in the Middle East through proxy groups and state-level ties

Source: Iran's Networks of Influence in the Middle East // International Institute for Strategic Studies. November 2019. P. 13.

URL: <https://www.iiss.org/globalassets/media-library---content--migration/files/publications---free-files/strategic-dossier/iran-dossier/irans-networks-of-influence-in-the-middle-east.pdf> (accessed: 05.10.2025).

Network Power Architecture: Engineering the Resistance Ecosystem

By introducing a network-based power architecture, the Soleimani Doctrine challenged traditional security paradigms based on state-centric alliances and territorial control, offering instead a flexible, dynamic, and organic model for managing Middle Eastern crises. Rather than building hierarchical armies or formal coalitions, Soleimani designed a living, organic ecosystem of resistance that encompassed a wide range of local and regional actors, from the *Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF)* and other resistance groups operating across Iraq's plains and cities, to Hezbollah in Lebanon's mountains; from Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad at the heart of Gaza's

resistance to Ansar Allah on Yemen's strategic coasts; and from transnational units such as the *Fatemiyoun*, *Zainabiyoun*, and *Haydariyoun* brigades to the National Defense Forces across Syria (Figure 1).

The culmination of this architecture was the integration of the indigenous resistance ecosystem with a global power after the start of the Russian Aerospace Forces operation in Syria, thereby creating a strategic synergy between Russian air power and the ground forces of the resistance.⁹ This engineering feat rested on three foundational

⁹ Soufan A. Qassem Soleimani and Iran's Unique Regional Strategy // CTC Sentinel. November 2018. Vol. 11. Iss. 10. URL: <https://ctc.westpoint.edu/qassem-soleimani-irans-unique-regional-strategy/> (accessed: 05.10.2025).

principles: operational decentralization with strategic coordination, localization of resistance, and creation of sustainable economic networks.

1. Operational Decentralization with Strategic Coordination. Unlike traditional command models grounded in rigid hierarchies and top-down orders, the Soleimani Doctrine's network architecture incorporated a dual logic—strategic and operational—that endowed the system with exceptional flexibility and resilience. Strategically, the IRGC Quds Force under Soleimani functioned as the *Strategic Hub*—the central coordinator and intellectual core of the network.

Rather than merely issuing military directives, this center focused on three key functions, representing a textbook case of networked governance, in which the hub regulates, empowers, and aligns autonomous nodes:

1. Grand strategic architecture and vision-setting. The Quds Force's central role was to formulate overarching strategic objectives: safeguarding the territorial integrity of allied states (Iraq and Syria), containing rival influence (the United States and Israel), and building a durable deterrence architecture in the region. By setting strategic horizons, prioritizing threats, and defining red lines, the hub prevented fragmentation and resource dissipation.¹⁰ Such strategic orientation translated into tangible battlefield successes.

Soleimani's capacity for designing and executing complex operations was evident on an even higher stage in his mission to Moscow, where he presented detailed field assessments to President Vladimir Putin, warning of the imminent collapse of the Syrian state and its grave implications for regional and global security, as well as for Russia's

great-power standing vis-à-vis the United States. His briefing persuaded Russia's leadership to intervene militarily in Syria—an act in the “Great Game” that decisively shifted the Syrian war's balance of power in favor of the Iran-aligned network.¹¹

2. Management of vital flows. The strategic hub oversaw the management and distribution of the network's vital flows: ideology (the resistance narrative), weaponry and technical expertise, financial resources, and intelligence. The overarching aim was to “empower” local nodes to act independently while remaining aligned with the broader network objectives (Dehghan, 2019; Erfanifar, 2020).

3. Cohesion-building and conflict resolution. Perhaps the most complex task was to unite a diverse array of actors, including sovereign states, regular armies (Iraq and Syria), resistance groups, emerging popular forces (PMF, National Defense Forces), local tribes and clans, and multinational brigades (*Fatemiyoun*, *Zainabiyoun*, *Haydariyoun*). Each possessed distinct organizational cultures, languages, local interests, and occasionally political rivalries. In such an environment, command-and-control authority alone was insufficient; legitimacy, charisma, and personal influence became essential.

This is where Soleimani's unique role as a social-military architect proved decisive. Drawing upon his wartime experience in mobilizing popular forces during the eight-year Iran—Iraq War, he implemented a model to bridge the state—society gap during crises. For example, during ISIS's (banned in Russia) 2014 invasion of Iraq, resistance factions that had previously refused to cooperate for political reasons united under one command for the decisive operation to

¹⁰ Iran's Networks of Influence in the Middle East // International Institute for Strategic Studies. November 2019. URL: <https://www.iiss.org/globalassets/media-library---content--migration/files/publications---free-files/strategic-dossier/iran-dossier/irans-networks-of-influence-in-the-middle-east.pdf> (accessed: 05.10.2025).

¹¹ Nasrallah: ‘It Was Iran's Soleimani Who Convinced Putin to Enter Syria War’ // Defend Democracy Press. January 25, 2021. URL: <https://www.defenddemocracy.press/nasrallah-it-was-irans-soleimani-who-convinced-putin-to-enter-syria-war/> (accessed: 05.10.2025).

liberate Amerli—not through orders, but through Soleimani’s mediation and personal credibility as a “powerful intermediary.”¹²

¹² See: Faraji M. Revayat-e kar-e namomkeni ke Sardar-e delha dar Aragh momken kard be zaban-e hamrazmash [The Story of the Impossible Task That the General of Hearts Made Possible in Iraq] // Islamic Republic News Agency (IRNA). January 3, 2024. (In Persian). URL: <https://www.irna.ir/news/85341874/%D8%B1%D9%88%D8%A7%DB%8C%D8%AA-%DA%A9%D8%A7%D8%B1-%D9%86%D8%A7%D9%85%D9%85%D8%A9%D9%86%DB%8C-%DA%A9%D9%87-%D8%B3%D8%B1%D8%AF%D8%A7-%D8%B1-%D8%AF%D9%84-%D9%87%D8%A7-%D8%AF%D8%B1-%D8%B9%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%82-%D9%85%D9%85%D8%A9%D9%86-%DA%A9%D8%B1%D8%AF-%D8%A8%D9%87-%D8%B2%D8%A8%D8%A7%D9%86-%D9%87%D9%85%D8%B1%D8%B2%D9%85%D8%B4-%D9%81%DB%8C%D9%84%D9%85> (accessed: 05.10.2025); Al-Basiri A. A. Majeray-e por-eltehab-e nabard ba entehari-ha-ye Daesh dar Beyji va piruzi ba tarh-e Haj Qasem: gofteguy-e ekhtesasi ba moaven-e amaliyat-e Hashd al-Shaabi [The Dramatic Story of the Battle against ISIS Suicide Bombers in Beiji and the Victory under Hajj Qasem’s Plan: An Exclusive Interview with the Deputy Head of the Hashd al-Shaabi Operations Department] // Tasnim News Agency. January 2, 2022. (In Persian). URL: <https://www.tasnimnews.ir/fa/news/1400/10/12/2636307/%D9%85%D8%A7%D8%AC%D8%B1%D8%A7%DB%8C-%D9%BE%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AA%D9%87%D8%A7%D8%A8-%D9%86%D8%A8%D8%B1%D8%AF-%D8%A8%D8%A7-%D8%A7%D9%86%D8%AA%D8%AD%D8%A7%D8%B1%DB%8C-%D9%87%D8%A7%DB%8C-%D8%AF%D8%A7%D8%B9%D8%B4-%D8%AF%D8%B1-%D8%A8%DB%8C%D8%AC%DB%8C-%D9%88-%D9%BE%DB%8C%D8%B1%D9%88%D8%B2%DB%8C-%D8%A8%D8%A7-%D8%B7%D8%B1%D8%AD-%D8%AD%D8%A7%D8%AC-%D9%82%D8%A7%D8%B3%D9%85-%DA%AF%D9%81%D8%AA%DA%AF%D9%88%DB%8C-%D8%A7%D8%AE%D8-%AA%D8%B5%D8%A7%D8%B5%DB%8C-%D8%A8%D8%A7%D8%A7-%D9%85%D8%B9%D8%A7%D9%88%D9%86-%D8%B9%D9%85%D9%84%DB%8C%D8%A7%D8%A-%D8%AD%D8%B4%D8%AF-%D8%B4%D8%B9%D8%A8%DB%8C> (accessed: 05.10.2025); Nagofteh-haei darboreh-ye shekast-e mohasereh-ye Amerli [Untold Stories about Breaking the Siege of Amerli] // Iranian Students News Agency (ISNA). December 21, 2021. (In Persian). URL: <https://www.isna.ir/news/1400093023859/%D9%86%D8%A7%DA%AF%D9%81%D8%AA%D9%87-%D9%87%D8%A7%DB%8C%DB%8C-%D8%AF%D8%B1%D8%A8%D8%A7%D8%B1%D9%87-%D8%B4%DA%A9%D8%B3%D8%AA-%D9%85%D8%AD%D8%A7%D8%B5%D8%B1%D9%87-%D8%A2%D9%85%D8%B1%D9%84%DB%8C> (accessed: 05.10.2025).

This role went beyond that of a field commander, exemplifying governance built on trust. In Syria, the challenge was even greater: Soleimani coordinated between the weakened Syrian army, the National Defense Forces modeled after Iran’s Basij, Hezbollah as an elite standing force, and volunteer contingents from Afghanistan (*Fatemiyoun*), Pakistan (*Zainabiyoun*), and Iraq (*Haydariyoun*). By attending joint command meetings and mediating in field disputes, he ensured that these multinational forces synergized toward common objectives, rather than dissipating their energies in counterproductive rivalries¹³ (Figure 2).

Even Israeli intelligence and analysts have noted this role. For instance, a report in *The Times of Israel* acknowledged Iran’s success in organizing and deploying forces to Syria, explicitly referencing this heterogeneous network. It listed groups such as *Harakat al-Nujaba*, *Kataib Sayyid al-Shuhada*, *Liwa Abu al-Fadl al-Abbas*, and the *Badr* Organization as part of an “international brigade” under Quds Force command, identifying Soleimani as its chief architect.¹⁴ Although framed as highlighting a threat, the report inadvertently corroborated, albeit from a different perspective,

¹³ Revayat-e dast-e avval-e yek farmandeh-ye ettelaati az 11 sal hamrahi ba Haj Qasem [A Firsthand Account from an Intelligence Commander of 11 Years of Service with Hajj Qasem] // Khabar Online. January 25, 2024. (In Persian). URL: <https://www.khabaronline.ir/photo/1860991/%D8%B1%D9%88%D8%A7%DB%8C%D8%AA-%D8%AF%D8%B3%D8%AA-%D8%A7%D9%88%D9%84-%DB%8C%DA%A9-%D9%81%D8%B1%D9%85%D8%A7%D9%86%D8%AF%D9%87-%D8%A7%D8%B7%D9%84%D8%A7%D8%B9%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D8%A7%D8%B2-%DB%B1%DB%B1-%D8%B3%D8%A7%D9%84-%D9%87%D9%85%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%87%DB%8C-%D8%A8%D8%A7-%D8%AD%D8%A7%D8%AC-%D9%82%D8%A7%D8%B3%D9%85> (accessed: 05.10.2025).

¹⁴ Gozaresh-ye Times-e Esraeil: tahqiqi jameh piramun-e ezam va hozur-e niruhaye zir-e amr-e hokumat-e Iran dar Surieh [A Comprehensive Study on the Deployment and Presence of Forces under the Command of the Iranian Government in Syria] // Times of Israel. August 9, 2017. (In Persian). URL: <https://fa.timesofisrael.com/syriairan122/> (accessed: 05.10.2025).

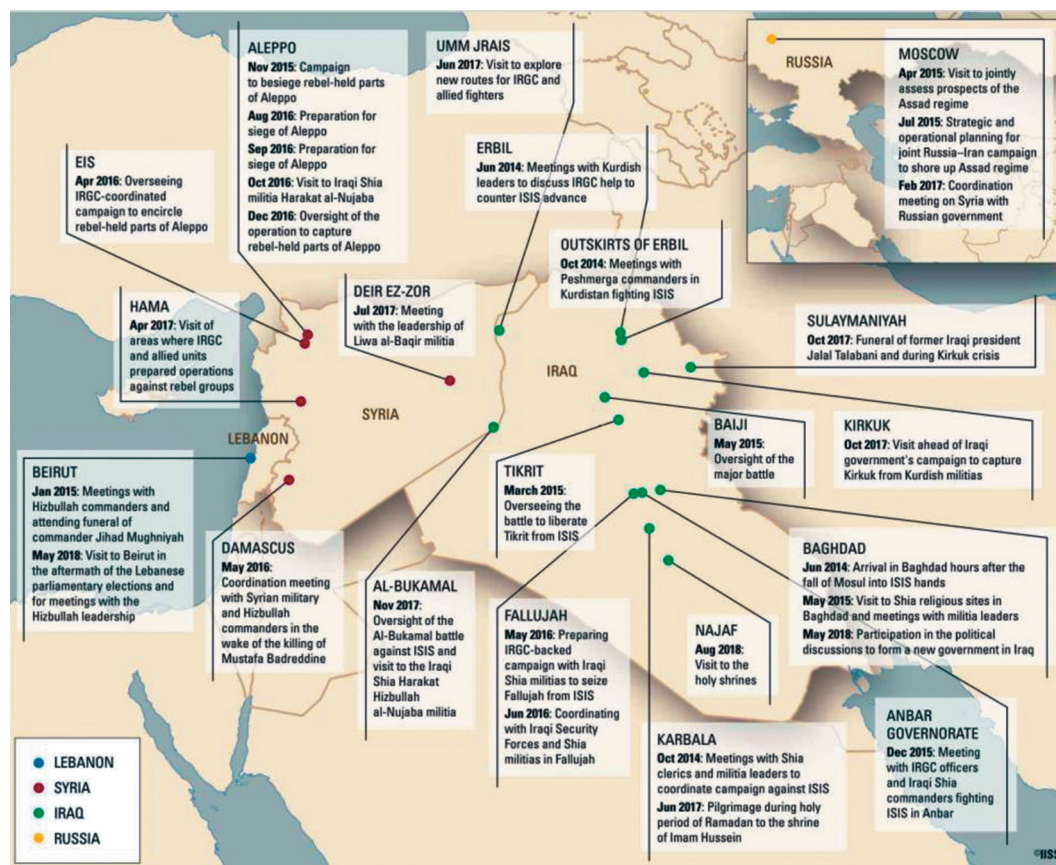


Figure 2. Map of General Qasem Soleimani's reported presence in Iraq, Lebanon, Syria, and Russia (2012–2018) for coordinating the Iran-aligned network

Source: Iran's Networks of Influence in the Middle East // International Institute for Strategic Studies. November 2019. P. 20.

URL: <https://www.iiss.org/globalassets/media-library---content--migration/files/publications---free-files/strategic-dossier/iran-dossier/irans-networks-of-influence-in-the-middle-east.pdf> (accessed: 05.10.2025).

the very coherence-building capacity celebrated in Iranian accounts.

Accordingly, this strategic centrality, embodied in a charismatic individual, formed the foundation that held together the operational and political complexities of the battlefield within the framework of a coherent grand strategy.

At the operational and tactical levels, however, the picture was entirely different: the network functioned in a decentralized manner. This model, known in modern military literature as mission command, granted the network's various nodes the authority to make rapid decisions and take action based on their knowledge of local conditions, precise understanding of terrain, and ability to seize fleeting tactical opportunities. This approach yielded three decisive strategic advantages.

First, flexibility and speed in decision-making: local cells and nodes could respond immediately to emerging threats or opportunities, without being hindered by bureaucracy or awaiting time-consuming central authorization. Such tactical agility proved particularly critical during crises, such as the sudden ISIS (banned in Russia) incursion into Iraq in 2014. At that moment, following the religious edict (*fatwa*) of the Shi'a marja' and amid significant disruption of Iraq's formal state structures, popular networks and resistance forces, under Soleimani's direct field leadership, organized defensive lines around Baghdad and the holy cities before the Iraqi army had mobilized.

Soleimani's continual presence on the front lines and his direct engagement with local commanders—not merely through issuing orders,

but through dialogue, persuasion, and trust-building—played a pivotal role in motivating forces to resist and retake territories. This participatory, field-based command style facilitated the rapid and effective formation of liberation operations in arenas such as Jurf al-Sakhar and Tikrit—operations that commenced, in many cases, prior to receiving official approval from Baghdad, thereby altering the course of battle.

Another example was the battle for al-Bukamal: Soleimani's tactical ingenuity here stands out as a prime instance of adaptability. In an unexpected move, and without informing lower-tier commanders, he withdrew forces from the predictable front and, via the Syrian desert (*Badiyat al-Sham*), launched a surprise attack on ISIS (banned in Russia) from the rear. This high-risk decision, which broke the group's stronghold, was possible only within a flexible command structure that granted full confidence to field commanders.¹⁵

Second, structural resilience against multi-pronged assaults: these included leadership targeting, sanctions, economic pressure, psychological warfare, and direct military operations. Unlike conventional armies, in which the loss of a key commander can paralyze the chain of command and trigger systemic collapse, the Iran-aligned network, operating through a network structure and distributing power among semi-autonomous nodes (such as Iraqi resistance factions, *Hezbollah* in Lebanon, *Hamas* in Gaza, and *Ansar Allah* in Yemen), has continued to

function—and even to strengthen—after losing top-tier commanders and prominent figures. This resilience stems from mutual trust, cadre-building for succession, and decentralized decision-making, enabling the network to adapt without dependence on a single central node.

A notable case was the assassinations of Lieutenant-General Qasem Soleimani and Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis in January 2020, which could have shattered the Iran-aligned network's strategic command. However, the network swiftly activated replacements, notably appointing Esmail Qaani, and maintained operational continuity. In fact, over the following years, the Axis intensified its actions against U.S. and Israeli interests.¹⁶

A similar pattern emerged in Lebanon's *Hezbollah*. In 2024, several top leaders and a large portion of its senior command cadre were assassinated in Israeli strikes, including Secretary-General Sayyid Hassan Nasrallah and Hashem Safieddine. Despite these significant losses, *Hezbollah*'s layered command structure and internal replacement capacity ensured that the organization did not collapse. Missile operations against Israel continued, and the rapid appointment of successors preserved strategic coherence, albeit amid temporary challenges.¹⁷

¹⁶ See: Ezzeddine N., Azizi H. Iran's Increasingly Decentralized Axis of Resistance // War on the Rocks. July 14, 2022. URL: <https://warontherocks.com/2022/07/irans-increasingly-decentralized-axis-of-resistance/> (accessed: 05.10.2025); The Soleimani Killing's Regional Implications // International Institute for Strategic Studies. March 2020. URL: <https://www.iiss.org/publications/strategic-comments/2020/the-soleimani-killings-regional-implications/> (accessed: 05.10.2025).

¹⁷ See: Ali-Khan V., Cambanis T. Down but Not Out: Reassessing the Axis of Resistance // The Century Foundation. March 19, 2025. URL: <https://tcf.org/content/report/down-but-not-out-reassessing-the-axis-of-resistance/> (accessed: 05.10.2025); Sadeghi M. R. Ayandeh-ye Hezbollah pas az Nasrallah; goruh-e siyasi-ye dakhli ya jihadi-ye manteqei? [Hezbollah's Future After Nasrallah: Domestic Political or Regional Jihadist Group?] // Markaz-e Pazhuhashha-ye Elmi va Motaleat-e Rahbordi-ye Khavar-e Miane [The Center for Middle Eastern Scientific Research and Strategic Studies]. February 3, 2025. (In Persian). URL: <https://www.cmess.ir/Page/View/2025-02-03/11462> (accessed: 05.10.2025).

¹⁵ See: Shaeri R. Revayat-e dast-e avval az azadsazi-ye Bukamal / Taktik-ha-yi ke kamar-e Daesh ra shekast [A First-Hand Account of the Liberation of Abu Kamal/The Tactics That Broke the Back of ISIS] // Mehr News Agency. January 2, 2021. (In Persian). URL: <https://mehrnews.com/xTswN> (accessed: 05.10.2025); Iran's Networks of Influence in the Middle East // International Institute for Strategic Studies. November 2019. P. 121–157. URL: <https://www.iiss.org/globalassets/media-library---content--migration/files/publications---free-files/strategic-dossier/iran-dossier/irans-networks-of-influence-in-the-middle-east.pdf> (accessed: 05.10.2025).

In Gaza, following the assassinations of *Hamas*'s highest political and military leaders during the 2023–2024 war, including Ismail Haniyeh in Tehran and Yahya Sinwar in Gaza, the movement's command and operational network remained active and even creative. No disruption was observed in combat organization, rocket strikes, or negotiation efforts. By dividing responsibilities among different branches and retaining a decentralized structure, *Hamas* maintained and continued its resistance against Israel.¹⁸

The Yemeni case presents a quite different, but complementary setting: *Ansar Allah* (Houthis) have withstood not only leadership-targeting scenarios, but also broader pressures, such as sustained Saudi-led coalition strikes, severe economic blockades, and direct U.S.-allied aerial attacks during 2023–2025 in response to Red Sea operations. The Houthis expanded their missile and naval capabilities, dispersed power among local commanders, and not only survived, but enhanced their regional influence, validating the effectiveness of the network model.¹⁹

All these examples illustrate the true meaning of networked resilience: the capacity to survive, adapt, and regenerate power even after the severest blows. Unlike conventional armies, this model has no single point of failure—a feature that has rendered it resistant to Israel's "Campaign Between the Wars" strategy, which focuses on targeted assassinations and capability attrition. The absence of a brittle center is a key reason for

the repeated failure of leader-elimination or collapse-oriented strategies deployed against the Iran-aligned network. In essence, the model enables the Axis to operate as a shape-shifting network, resilient to external shocks.²⁰

Third, reduced costs and risks: the architecture served as a smart model for resource management. Most operations were conducted by local forces—fighters more motivated to defend their own territories—thus minimizing the political, economic, and human costs of deploying Iranian personnel directly. Rather than relying heavily on its domestic resources, Iran pursued an "empowerment" strategy, which became a decisive advantage in competition with global powers. Soleimani's central role as the "coordinating hub"—present in the field, negotiating with, and building trust among local commanders from Iraq to Lebanon and Yemen—ensured strategic cohesion without constraining the tactical autonomy of individual nodes. This feature transformed the network into a "united front" that, despite its diverse actors, pursued a shared strategic objective.²¹

2. Localization of Resistance: Embedding in Local Communities. The second principle of this architecture, going beyond mere localization, constituted a long-term strategy for the self-reliance and self-sufficiency of resistance nodes. Contrary to the prevalent Western perception of resistance groups as mere "proxies" of Iran, this approach emphasized empowering local actors with deep social roots and intrinsic motivations.

¹⁸ Mansour R. The Axis of Resilience: Israel Is Underestimating Iran and Its Allies // Foreign Affairs. November 13, 2024. URL: <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/middle-east/axis-resilience> (accessed: 05.10.2025).

¹⁹ See: Blanchard C. M. Yemen: Conflict, Red Sea Attacks, and U.S. Policy // Congressional Research Service. CRS In Focus. No. IF12581. July 22, 2025. URL: <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/IF/IF12581> (accessed: 05.10.2025); Khoury N. A. Yemen's Houthi Movement Reconsidered // Arab Center Washington DC. June 12, 2025. URL: <https://arabcenterdc.org/resource/yemens-houthi-movement-reconsidered/> (accessed: 05.10.2025).

²⁰ Mansour R. The Axis of Resilience: Israel Is Underestimating Iran and Its Allies // Foreign Affairs. November 13, 2024. URL: <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/middle-east/axis-resilience> (accessed: 05.10.2025).

²¹ See: Asadollahi M. Estratezhik fekr mikard, taktiki amal mikard [He Thought Strategically and Acted Tactically] // Khamenei.ir. January 9, 2021. (In Persian). URL: <https://farsi.khamenei.ir/others-dialog?id=47304> (accessed: 05.10.2025); Soufan A. Qassem Soleimani and Iran's Unique Regional Strategy // CTC Sentinel. November 2018. Vol. 11. Iss. 10. URL: <https://ctc.westpoint.edu/qassem-soleimani-irans-unique-regional-strategy/> (accessed: 05.10.2025).

In the Palestinian case this principle reached its zenith. Soleimani's strategy transformed the resistance from the era of the "*stone intifada*" into an era of missile-based deterrence. Rather than fostering total dependency, the strategy rested on two operational axes: (1) establishing covert networks for transferring key components, and (2) transferring technical know-how to Palestinian engineers for indigenous weapons production using simple raw materials, such as steel pipes and sugar.

The result was Gaza's indigenous missile arsenal (*al-Qassam*, *Fajr*, *Badr*, *Qassem*), which challenged Israel's war machine and created a self-sustaining ecosystem.²² As stated by Ayatollah Khamenei, Supreme Leader of the Islamic Republic: "This man gave the Palestinians a full hand; he made it so that a very small area—a mere strip like Gaza—could stand up to the Zionist regime in all its arrogance, inflicting such damage that within forty-eight hours they themselves say, 'Come, let us have a ceasefire.' This was the work of Haj Qasem Soleimani."²³

Rooting within the social fabric: The Soleimani Doctrine has strengthened groups such as Iraq's PMF, Syria's *National Defense Forces*, and Yemen's *Ansar Allah*, all of which emerged organically from their local communities. For example, the PMF was formed in Iraq following the Shi'a *fatwa* of Ayatollah Sistani, with broad participation from Iraqi tribes and youth. Such

rootedness has enhanced social legitimacy and neutralized hostile propaganda. Hezbollah in Lebanon is the most prominent example of this resilience, combining military capabilities with an extensive network of schools, hospitals, and service institutions deeply embedded in society. *Ansar Allah* in Yemen, likewise, evolved from a localized movement into a regional power, capable—through transferred technical expertise and a fully indigenous workforce—of sustaining a prolonged war of attrition.²⁴

This localization produced three strategic functions:

- increased social legitimacy. Local forces were perceived as "defenders of the land" rather than "foreign mercenaries," undermining adversarial narratives aimed at discrediting the network. The wide Iraqi participation in the PMF, for example, weakened the "Iranian expansionism" trope,

- access to local resources. Indigenous groups possessed field intelligence, logistical networks, and socio-cultural familiarity with the area—advantages impossible for a foreign force to replicate. *Ansar Allah*'s use of Yemen's geography during the 2024–2025 Red Sea operations is a key illustration,

- long-term sustainability. Following the de-escalation of acute crises, locally embedded armed and political groups often persisted as enduring political-military actors within their national contexts, thereby extending Iran's strategic influence without the requirement for a sustained direct military presence.

3. Sustainable Economic Networks: The Resistance Economic Ecosystem. In the economic domain, Soleimani's networked architecture moved far beyond security provision to create what can be termed a "Resistance Economic

²² Naqsh-e Shahid Soleimani dar erteqa-ye qodrat-e moqavemat-e Felestin [The Role of Martyr Soleimani in Strengthening the Potential of the Palestinian Resistance] // Mehr News Agency. January 2, 2024. (In Persian). URL: <https://www.mehrnews.com/news/5983009/%D9%86%D9%82%D8%B4-%D8%B4%D9%87%DB%8C%D8%AF-%D8%B3%D9%84%DB%8C%D9%85%D8%A7%D9%86%DB%8C-%D8%AF%D8%B1-%D8%A7%D8%B1%D8%AA%D9%82%D8%A7%DB%8C-%D9%82%D8%AF%D8%B1%D8%AA-%D9%85%D9%82%D8%A7%D9%88%D9%85%D8%AA-%D9%81%D9%84%D8%B3%D8%B7%DB%8C%D9%86> (accessed: 05.10.2025).

²³ Khamenei A. Bayanat dar didar-e mardom-e Qom [Speech at a Meeting with Residents of Qom] // Khamenei.ir. January 8, 2020. (In Persian). URL: <https://farsi.khamenei.ir/speech-content?id=44628> (accessed: 05.10.2025).

²⁴ The Soleimani Killing's Regional Implications // International Institute for Strategic Studies. March 2020. URL: <https://www.iiss.org/publications/strategic-comments/2020/the-soleimani-killings-regional-implications/> (accessed: 05.10.2025).

Ecosystem” with two core strategic functions: countering the United States’ strategy of economic attrition, and building a durable web of extra-regional economic flows. This network rested on shared ideological currents—Axis of Resistance solidarity, opposition to Western hegemony, and defense of the oppressed—which forged a unified transnational identity among diverse actors.

Within the framework of the great-power competition with China, the United States pursued a deliberate policy of degrading economic infrastructure across the Afghanistan—Mediterranean corridor: from dismantling Afghanistan’s northern railway, which blocked corridor access to Iran, to obstructing electricity development projects in Iraq, and controlling all Iraqi currency transactions through a U.S.-based oversight office.²⁵ The Soleimani Doctrine, by safeguarding national sovereignty and territorial integrity in both Iraq and Syria, succeeded in neutralizing these destructive measures and in preserving the security-economic infrastructure of these states.

At the same time, Soleimani’s approach established a complex and decentralized economic network that relied not only on formal channels but also on local and popular capacities. Iran’s exports to Iraq increased from under USD 800 million in the mid-2000s to USD 9 billion—four times Iran’s combined exports to the European Union and the United States.²⁶

²⁵ Shakeri M. Negahi be naqsh-e Shahid Soleymani dar towse’e-ye zirsakht-ha-ye eqtesadi-ye manteqe-ye Gharb-e Asia [Look at the Role of Martyr Soleimani in Developing the Economic Infrastructure of the West Asia Region] // Amrikashenasi [American Studies Bimonthly], 2022. No. 17. P. 107. (In Persian). URL: <https://ascenter.ir/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/Binder23-1.pdf> (accessed: 05.10.2025).

²⁶ Jozeyat-e saderat-e 9 milyard dolari-ye Iran be Aragh dar sal-e 1400 [Details of Iran’s \$9 Billion Exports to Iraq in Iranian Year 1400] // Iran Economist. April 17, 2022. (In Persian). URL: <https://iraneconomist.com/fa/news/418453/%D8%AC%D8%B2%D8%A6%DB%8C%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D8%B5%D8%A7%D8%AF%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%AA-%DB%B9-%D9%85%DB%8C%D9%84%DB%8C%D8%A7%D8%B1%D8%AF-%D8%AF%D9%84%D8%A7%D8%B1%DB%8C-%D8%A7%DB%8C%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%86-%D8%A8%D9%87-%D8%B9%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%82-%D8%AF%D8%B1-%D8%B3%D8%A7%D9%84-%DB%B1%DB%B4%DB%B0%DB%B0> (accessed: 05.10.2025).

This expansion was achieved through three main mechanisms:

1. Innovation in trade infrastructure. Eighteen border markets were established on Iranian territory, enabling Iraqi traders to operate without visas or Baghdad-issued permits. This transformed Iran from a geographically constrained trader into one with a vast matrix of cross-border corridors. While Iraq relied on a single primary crossing with Türkiye and only recently reopened its ‘Ar’ar crossing with Saudi Arabia, Iran maintained ten active official crossings coupled with eighteen border markets—constituting a uniquely dense trading network.

2. Economic institutionalization. The establishment of the “Headquarters for the Development of Iran—Iraq Economic Relations” went beyond trade facilitation, addressing structural impediments and enabling long-term planning—an embodiment of what Slaughter refers to as “functional governance networks.”

3. Creation of economic strategic depth. Iraq served not only as an export destination but also as a sanctions-bypassing gateway and a bridge to broader regional markets. This depth allowed Iranian participation in the reconstruction of Syria and Iraq—markets with decade-long potential in engineering, construction, and industrial materials.²⁷

This economic architecture mirrored the logic of operational decentralization: local nodes were

²⁷ Dolarhayi ke ba tadbir-e Haj Qasem nasib-e Iran shod [The Dollars Iran Received Thanks to Hajj Qasem’s Foresight] // Mashregh News. January 3, 2021. (In Persian). URL: <https://www.mashreghnews.ir/news/1163189/%D8%AF%D9%84%D8%A7%D8%B1%D9%87%D8%A7%DB%8C%DB%8C-%DA%A9%D9%87-%D8%A8%D8%A7-%D8%AA%D8%AF%D8%A8%DB%8C%D8%B1-%D8%AD%D8%A7%D8%AC-%D9%82%D8%A7%D8%B3%D9%85-%D9%86%D8%B5%DB%8C%D8%A8-%D8%A7%DB%8C%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%86-%D8%B4%D8%AF> (accessed: 05.10.2025).

empowered to act rapidly on the basis of detailed market knowledge and transient opportunities, while strategic coordination was maintained through central headquarters. This reduced the political costs of direct presence while generating sustainable, sanctions-resilient revenue streams.

By operating simultaneously on three levels—local (the defense of community—level economic structures), regional (influencing the Middle Eastern balance of power), and transnational (contesting a Western-led regional order)—this model translated into concrete strategic capacity.

In sum, the Network Power Architecture, as the structural backbone of the Soleimani Doctrine, integrated operational decentralization, localization of armed and political activity, and sustainable economic networking into an ecosystem that was distributed yet coordinated, locally embedded yet transnational in reach, and adaptable in function. This configuration closely corresponds to Manuel Castells's (2009a) concept of "power in the space of flows," defined as the capacity to regulate and manage the critical flows upon which networked entities depend. Beyond enabling Iran to pursue strategic objectives with comparatively limited material expenditure, this architecture contributed to the generation of adaptive strategic depth and resilience in response to multi-layered pressures, ranging from kinetic military action to information operations. As such, it established the structural conditions for the subsequent pillars of Identity Discourse Engineering and Operational Risk Management, examined in the following sections.

Identity Discourse Engineering: Forging a Collective Resistance Imagination

If the Network Power Architecture can be understood as the "hardware" of the Soleimani Doctrine, then Identity Discourse Engineering functioned as its discursive "software," elevating the network from a loose military coalition into

a relatively durable and transnational mobilizational framework. This pillar draws on constructivist approaches and Critical Security Studies, particularly the Copenhagen School's theory of securitization (Buzan, Wæver & de Wilde, 1998), this pillar constructed a powerful, shared identity. It brought together actors of diverse cultural, religious, and national backgrounds—Shi'a and Sunni, Arab and Persian—around the unifying ideal of "resistance."

Through the creation of a collective resistance imagination, this pillar provided internal legitimacy and generated sustained motivational capacity for volunteer mobilization, while simultaneously functioning as a discursive buffer against adversarial psychological operations and information pressure. This multidimensional process rested on two foundational components: the discursive construction of a threatening "Other," and the formation of a religiously-inflected, transnational "Self."

Constructing the Threatening "Other"

For the cohesion and legitimacy of the Iran-aligned network, a clear definition of the adversary was essential—one capable of suspending internal frictions among heterogeneous groups and aligning them toward a shared focal point. Within this framework, the Soleimani Doctrine discursively constructed two distinct yet complementary 'Others' and, through securitizing speech acts, elevated them to the status of perceived existential threats:

- external actors, framed within resistance discourse as manifestations of 'imperialism,' particularly the United States and Israel,
- takfiri terrorism, epitomized by ISIS (banned in Russia) and *Jabhat al-Nusra*.²⁸

²⁸ Hereinafter, an organization included in the Unified Federal List of Organizations, containing foreign and international organizations, recognized as terrorist in accordance with the legislation of the Russian Federation is mentioned.

This reframing discursively elevated the conflict from a military confrontation to what was presented as a moral, religious, and civilizational obligation.²⁹

From one perspective, the United States and Israel were portrayed in official and mobilizational discourse as manifestations of “global domination” and “occupation.” Within this narrative framework, resistance was framed not as aggression, but as the legitimate defense, as defined by its proponents, of independence, national sovereignty, and the region’s cultural and religious values. *Quds Day* slogans, speeches by resistance leaders, and sustained media output depicted Israel through delegitimizing metaphors such as a “cancerous tumor” and as a perceived existential threat, while the United States was framed as the “Great Satan” and portrayed as a patron of colonialism and terrorism. This discursive framing functioned to reinforce a shared and urgent sense of duty across the network, irrespective of nationality.³⁰

²⁹ See: Brodsky J.M., Mansharof Y. Soleimani Birthed Iran’s Axis of Resistance, Ghaani Coordinated It // Middle East Institute. December 15, 2023. URL: <https://www.mei.edu/publications/soleimani-birthed-irans-axis-resistance-ghaani-coordinated-it> (accessed: 05.10.2025); Naqsh-e rahbordiy-e Shahid Sepahbod Haj Qasem Soleimani dar shekl-giri va taghviyat-e mehvar-e moqavemat [The Strategic Role of the Martyr Lieutenant General Hajj Qasem Soleimani in the Formation and Strengthening of the Axis of Resistance] // Defa Press. December 31, 2023. (In Persian). URL: <https://defapress.ir/fa/news/641602/%D9%86%D9%82%D8%B4-%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%87%D8%A8%D8%B1%D8%AF%DB%8C-%D8%B4%D9%87%DB%8C%D8%AF-%D8%B3%D9%BE%D9%87%D8%A8%D8%AF-%D8%AD%D8%A7%D8%AC-%D9%82%D8%A7%D8%B3%D9%85-%D8%B3%D9%84%DB%8C%D9%85%D8%A7%D9%86%DB%8C-%D8%AF%D8%B1-%D8%B4%DA%A9%D9%84%E2%80%8C%DA%AF%DB%8C%D8%B1%DB%8C-%D9%88-%D8%AA%D9%82%D9%88%DB%8C%D8%AA-%D9%85%D8%AD%D9%88%D8%B1-%D9%85%D9%82%D8%A7%D9%88%D9%85%D8%AA> (accessed: 05.10.2025).

³⁰ See: Mahamad A. Iran’s Shadow Network: The Axis of Resistance Explained // IranWire. December 6, 2024. URL: <https://iranwire.com/en/politics/136769-irans-shadow-network-the-axis-of-resistance-explained/> (accessed: 05.10.2025); Iran: U.S. and Israeli Threats & Options // The Iran Primer. United States Institute of Peace. January 26, 2023. URL: <https://iranprimer.usip.org/blog/2023/jan/26/iran-us-and-israeli-threats-options> (accessed: 05.10.2025).

From another perspective, ISIS (banned in Russia) and *Jabhat al-Nusra* (banned in Russia) were presented as an internal threat to the region’s social and civilizational fabric—an extreme deviation targeting not just physical security, but the very Islamic and human identity of the societies concerned. By emphasizing the defense of the sanctuaries of *Ahl al-Bayt* and the protection of Islamic and Christian holy sites, this discourse transcended sectarian Shi’a boundaries, even attracting non-Muslim communities such as Christians and Yazidis in Iraq and Syria into an informal alignment with the resistance. The unprecedented popular mobilization against ISIS (banned in Russia) in Iraq (2014–2017)—uniting Shi’a, Sunni, Kurdish, and Christian forces—was a landmark example of the success of this strategic narrative.³¹

This carefully engineered enemy construction produced two key strategic benefits:

- by introducing a greater common threat, it dramatically downplayed historical, religious, and ethnic divisions within the Iran-aligned network, forging a more cohesive and effective front,
- by defining the struggle as a simultaneous fight against foreign occupation and domestic terrorism, it generated a compelling narrative capable of garnering regional—and even global—public support, while countering Western media campaigns portraying these groups as “terrorist proxies.”

Creating the Sacred, Transnational ‘Self’

The second pillar of this identity engineering involved the construction of a shared, religiously-inflected transnational identity, transforming the network from a tactical alignment into a longer-term civilizational narrative. This process was centered on the transcendent concept of “resistance,” as articulated within the

³¹ Soufan A. Qassem Soleimani and Iran’s Unique Regional Strategy // CTC Sentinel. November 2018. Vol. 11. Iss. 10. URL: <https://ctc.westpoint.edu/qassem-soleimani-irans-unique-regional-strategy/> (accessed: 05.10.2025).

movement's own discourse. This identity was sustained through the systematic deployment of symbols, collective rituals, and media-driven narrative construction, which served to bind otherwise disparate communities into a shared collective imagination.

Transnational rituals, such as the annual *Quds Day* marches from Tehran to Beirut and Sana'a, acted as performative reaffirmations of the resistance identity. Commemorations honoring fallen fighters from a range of nationalities—Lebanese, Iraqi, Afghan, Pakistani, and Iranian—and the promotion of the “Defenders of the Shrines” narrative deepen the sense of unity and shared purpose. These rituals, sanctifying concepts such as martyrdom and sacrifice, provided profound spiritual motivation for volunteer recruitment.

Alongside these rituals, the resistance's robust media apparatus—from traditional outlets like *Al-Manar* and *Al-Mayadeen* to modern digital platforms—relentlessly broadcast stories of victory, steadfastness, and injustice, countering Western media dominance. This identity-building proved so compelling that it drew in groups such as Afghanistan's *Fatemiyoun*, Pakistan's *Zeinabiyoun*, and volunteers from Iraq and Syria—not through forced conscription, but through faith in a shared identity and a deeply felt religious duty (Cingöz et al., 2024; Wastnidge & Mabon, 2024).

Ultimately, as the “software” of the Soleimani Doctrine, this identity discourse engineering—through the parallel construction of a threatening ‘Other’ and a sacred ‘Self’—transformed the resistance network into a meaningful and resilient movement. By fostering ideological cohesion, sustained human mobilization, and the legitimacy of objectives, it not only heightened the network's resilience against military and psychological pressures, but also positioned it as a decisive force in shaping regional and global narratives. This solidified identity base, in turn, provided the essential foundation for the doctrine's third pillar:

Operational Risk Management, which constitutes the executive and field logic of this complex architecture.

Operational Risk Management: The Logic of Hybrid Warfare in the Gray Zone

If the first two pillars of the Soleimani Doctrine—Network Power Architecture and Identity Discourse Engineering—respectively shaped the body and soul of the Iran-aligned network, the third pillar, Operational Risk Management, was its brain and executive logic. This pillar translated the Axis's structural capability and ideological motivation into calculated, high-impact battlefield action.

Its core lay in shifting the confrontation away from costly, direct, symmetrical military engagements into the gray zone—an ambiguous space between war and peace in which the rules of engagement are uncertain and responsibility can be plausibly denied (Kalantari & Najafi Sayar, 2024, p. 65). Grounded in hybrid warfare and asymmetric deterrence (Hoffman, 2007), this approach allowed the Iran-aligned network to impose significant costs on powerful rivals such as the United States and Israel, while avoiding the full-scale wars that could be strategically and materially ruinous.

Hybrid Warfare as a Coordinated Multi-Domain Strategy

At the core of this logic was the coordinated and simultaneous integration of multiple instruments of power. Alongside conventional military practices, such as advising, arming, and training proxy forces, the doctrine employed irregular tactics, including guerrilla warfare, psychological operations, cyber activities, and economic pressure. This integrated approach engaged adversaries across multiple domains, constraining their capacity to deliver a decisive and concentrated response (Hoffman, 2007, pp. 7–9, 36).

Field evidence of this hybrid model was abundant. In Syria and Iraq (2011–2018), the IRGC Quds Force not only armed and trained local formations such as *al-Hashd al-Sha'bi* in Iraq and the National Defence Forces in Syria, but also placed its commanders in forward positions to direct integrated operations. The liberation of Mosul and al-Bukamal (2016–2017) are prime examples, where Iraqi ground offensives were coordinated with information warfare and psychological campaigns on social media to weaken ISIS (banned in Russia) morale and reinforce the legitimacy of the resistance.³²

This approach offered several strategic advantages:

- surprise and ambiguity: adversaries frequently struggled to discern the nature, origin, and ultimate objective of attacks,
- cost-effectiveness for Iran: reliance on locally motivated forces reduced the need for large-scale Iranian deployments,
- network resilience: the distributed operational model absorbed shocks while maintaining offensive capacity.

Asymmetric Deterrence and the Logic of Cost-Imposition

Complementing hybrid warfare was the doctrine's asymmetric deterrence calculus, built not on achieving military parity, but on sustaining a balance of terror through erosive, intolerable cost-imposition. The essential logic: keep the

adversary in a permanent, expensive defensive posture, without crossing the threshold into open war.

This strategy worked through a precise cost-benefit analysis, systematically targeting adversaries' economic, psychological, and political vulnerabilities.

Strategic functions included:

– Erosion-based deterrence: the 2019 *Ansar Allah* strikes on Saudi Aramco's oil facilities and subsequent naval operations against Israeli-linked shipping in the Red Sea (2024–2025) imposed massive economic and psychological costs without a formal declaration of war,³³

– plausible deniability: operations carried out by networked proxies allowed Iran to deny direct responsibility and significantly reduce the risk of direct military retaliation on its territory. Multiple cyberattacks on Israel's critical infrastructure in 2023–2024 exemplified this tactic,³⁴

– tactical flexibility and tech adaptation: the Axis rapidly integrated inexpensive yet disruptive emerging technologies—such as drones and precision cruise missiles—into its arsenal, shifting local and regional power balances.³⁵

The Integrating Function of Operational Risk Management

In essence, Operational Risk Management functioned as an integral mechanism linking networked structures with identity-based mobilization. By combining hybrid warfare

³² See: Amaliyat-e bozorg-e azadsazi-ye Mosul-e Aragh va sharayet-e ayandeh-ye terrorist-ha [A Major Operation to Liberate Iraq's Mosul and the Future Prospects of Terrorists] // Strategic Council on Foreign Relations. 2016. (In Persian). URL: <https://scfr.ir/fa/300/14151/%D8%B9%D9%85%D9%84%DB%8C%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D8%A8%D8%B2%D8%B1%DA%AF-%D8%A2%D8%B2%D8%A7%D8%AF%D8%B3%D8%A7%D8%B2%DB%8C-%D9%85%D9%88%D8%B5%D9-%84-%D8%B9%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%82-%D9%88-%D8%B4%D8%B1%D8%A7%DB%8C%D8%B7/> (accessed: 05.10.2025); Shaeri R. Revayat-e dast-e avval az azadsazi-ye Bukamal / Taktik-ha-yi ke kamar-e Daesh ra shekast [A First-Hand Account of the Liberation of Abu Kamal/The Tactics That Broke the Back of ISIS] // Mehr News Agency. January 2, 2021. (In Persian). URL: <https://mehrnews.com/xTswN> (accessed: 05.10.2025).

³³ Blanchard C. M. Yemen: Conflict, Red Sea Attacks, and U.S. Policy // Congressional Research Service. CRS In Focus. No. IF12581. July 22, 2025. URL: <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/IF/IF12581> (accessed: 05.10.2025).

³⁴ Bish az 3 milyon dolar khasarat-e salaneh-ye Sahyonist-ha az hamalat-e sayberi [The Annual Damage to Zionists from Cyberattacks Exceeds \$3 Million] // Tasnim News Agency. May 10, 2025. (In Persian). URL: <https://www.tasnimnews.ir/fa/news/1404/02/20/3309459/> (accessed: 05.10.2025).

³⁵ Newman M. Hamas's Cheap, Makeshift Drones Are Outsmarting Israel's High-Tech Military // Bloomberg. December 19, 2023. URL: <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2023-12-19/israel-s-advanced-defenses-are-pierced-by-makeshift-hamas-drones-in-gaza-war> (accessed: 05.10.2025).

Integrated Analytical Matrix of the Soleimani Doctrine

Analytical Pillar	Core Mechanisms	Analytical Implications	Structural Constraints
1. Network Power Architecture	Decentralized coordination; linkage of state and non-state actors; localization of resources	Network-based distribution of power and responsibilities beyond formal state hierarchies	Dependence on internal cohesion; exposure to technological and logistical asymmetries
2. Identity Discourse Engineering	Discursive construction of collective identity; symbolic framing; transnational narratives	Production of cohesion and legitimacy across heterogeneous social contexts	Vulnerability to discursive erosion, counter-framing, and limited resonance outside the network
3. Operational Risk Management	Hybrid and asymmetric practices; ambiguity and indirect engagement	Redistribution and management of risk across multiple nodes under conditions of uncertainty	Risk of escalation through miscalculation; sensitivity to advanced surveillance and precision technologies

Source: compiled by A. Zareei.

practices with asymmetric deterrence logics, it enabled the Iran-aligned network of state and non-state actors to pursue strategic objectives while maintaining a calculated and limited risk exposure. This operational logic partially offset material asymmetries through structural and strategic advantages, contributing to Iran's dynamic strategic depth within a highly volatile regional environment and completing the overall architecture of the Soleimani Doctrine (Table).

Conclusion

The *Soleimani Doctrine*, which is conceptualized as an indigenous, network-centric, and hybrid security paradigm, represents a significant analytical departure from dominant state-centric approaches to security in the Middle East. Rather than constituting a prescriptive policy model, it is best understood as a contextually embedded framework through which security governance is organized across fragmented political and conflict environments.

By moving beyond conventional paradigms, this study has reconstructed the doctrine as a multilayered model structured around three interdependent analytical pillars: Network Power Architecture, Identity Discourse Engineering, and

Operational Risk Management. Examined collectively, these pillars illuminate the internal logic through which a network-based security system coordinates diverse actors, produces cohesion across heterogeneous social contexts, and manages risk under conditions of asymmetry and strategic uncertainty. The comparative distinctiveness of this framework lies not in material superiority, but in its emphasis on network orientation, identity-based mobilization, and localization—features that differentiate it conceptually from classical realist and Western strategic templates.

From an analytical perspective, the study contributes to Critical Security Studies and non-Western international relations theory by demonstrating how security can be constituted outside formal state institutions through discursive, networked, and hybrid mechanisms. The concept of the Soleimani Doctrine, therefore, functions as a theoretical lens for examining alternative modes of security organization rather than as a generalized or universally transferable model.

At the same time, the analysis highlights the structural constraints and vulnerabilities inherent in such network-based systems, including risks of internal fragmentation, technological asymmetries, and evolving forms of warfare. These limitations

underscore the contingent and context-dependent nature of the doctrine and caution against deterministic interpretations.

Ultimately, the significance of the Soleimani Doctrine lies in its contribution to the rethinking of security beyond hierarchical command structures and territorially bounded power. As an analytically reconstructed paradigm, it expands

the conceptual vocabulary of security studies by illustrating how networked ecosystems can generate continuity, adaptability, and strategic coordination even in the absence of centralized or charismatic leadership. In this sense, the study opens further avenues for theorizing security governance in complex and unstable regional environments beyond the Middle East.

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