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## Ayatollah Khamenei's Shia International looms large

After the fall of the last bastion of the Islamic State (ISIS) in Abu Kamal, close to Syria's border with Iraq, a senior member of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) announced the extremist group's "total defeat" to the world.

Major-General Qassem Soleimani, chief commander of the IRGC's al-Quds Force, which manages extraterritorial operations, sent a letter to Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. In Soleimani's letter, he thanked "Iranian, Iraqi, Syrian, Lebanese, Afghan and Pakistani guardians of the shrine" who sacrificed their lives defending the "life and honour of Muslims."

The nationalities mentioned were not random. They make up the bulk of Shia fighters under his command in Syria and Iraq. This writer's survey of foreign Shia fighters killed in combat in Syria provides corroboration. I have identified, at the very least, 785 Afghans, 526 Iranians, 105 Iraqis, 1,201 Lebanese and 144 Pakistanis killed in the fighting since January 2012. In Iraq, I have totalled 2,393 Iraqi losses and 42 Iranian nationals killed since the rise of ISIS.

However, Tehran's outreach is not limited to these nationalities.

There are no accurate statistics on the number of Shia worldwide, but as the second largest sect within Islam, Shia likely constitute between 10-13% of Muslims, or between 150 million-200 million people worldwide. In Lebanon and the Persian Gulf region, there is a much higher percentage of Shia.

Regardless of the size of the Shia community in Iran's neighbourhood, Ayatollah Khamenei has grander designs than leading a minority within Islam. He has tried hard to depict himself as vali-ye amr-e Moslemin, or chief guardian of Muslims. In an attempt to take over leadership of the Muslim umma, or community of believers, he has chosen a bifurcated approach.

Khamenei, like his predecessor Grand Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, has tried to overcome the Shia/Sunni divide by identify-



**Exporting zeal.** Women wave a Lebanese national flag and Hezbollah flags in front of a portrait of Iran's supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, in the southern Lebanese town of Bint Jbeil. (AFP)

ing the United States and Israel as common enemies of all Muslims. According to this narrative, Sunni Arab leaders who pursue their national interests in cooperation with the United States and peaceful coexistence with Israel are traitors and lackeys of global arrogance.

The Islamic Republic is also aiming to export the revolution enshrined in its constitution. Article 154 of Iran's Constitution obliges the state to support "the just

struggles of the oppressed against the oppressors in every corner of the globe." For all practical purposes, this means trying to control Shia communities in Afghanistan, Bahrain, Iraq, Kuwait, Lebanon and Saudi Arabia and undermining the Sunnis.

Under Khamenei, the Islamic Republic is pursuing its goals in a more sophisticated fashion than in the early days of the 1979 revolution. Today, Tehran boasts a

multifaceted approach tailored to social and political conditions in disparate countries.

In Lebanon, Tehran has successfully managed to create and nurture Hezbollah as the central political player and formidable military force. At the same time, Iran has attempted to keep Lebanese state institutions weak. The militia also constitutes Tehran's first line of defence in conflicts with Israel and serves as a mercenary force in regional conflicts such as the civil war in Syria.

In Iraq, the Islamic Republic pursues a policy of supporting Shia control over the government, even as it undermines it by providing military and logistical support to Iraqi Shia militias that are not within Baghdad's control. In doing so, Iraqi Shia will find themselves in a permanent state of dependency on Tehran.

In Afghanistan, by training the Fatemiyoun Division in Syria, Tehran is preparing for NATO's possible disentanglement from Central Asia. The Shia Afghan division can be deployed to advance Tehran's interests in Afghanistan and could help create a buffer zone between the Sunni-dominated centre and Iran's vulnerable eastern borders.

In Bahrain, Tehran uses political means to take advantage of the crisis between the country's Shia population and the Sunni rulers.

In Saudi Arabia and Yemen, the Islamic Republic tries to entangle the house of Saud in a costly military conflict with the Houthis. It also keeps Saudi security forces preoccupied with internal security threats to the kingdom, in particular in the Eastern Province by inciting the local Shia population against Riyadh.

In Kuwait, where the Shia are an integrated part of the political power structure, the Islamic Republic tries hard, but unsuccessfully, to infiltrate the Shia community and simultaneously pursues a policy of driving a wedge between Kuwait and Saudi Arabia.

The Islamic Republic's multifaceted approach is paying off. This should make the Sunni rulers consider the social, political and economic conditions that propel some Arab Shia to Tehran for support.

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## Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe's case reflects Iran's targeting of dual nationals

**Gareth Smyth**

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Britain's relationship with Iran has long been colourful and often fraught. Not even the United States so deeply pricks Iranian sensibilities or has so fuelled their conspiracy theorists. These include Iranians not born when the popular 1970s television series "My Uncle Napoleon" featured a character convinced British plots were behind all his problems.

Boris Johnson, the UK foreign secretary, is as haphazard as dear Uncle. Johnson's comment to the British parliament that Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe, the 38-year-old British-Iranian dual national jailed in Tehran, was training journalists before her arrest in April 2016 contradicted the UK government's insistence she was in Iran on holiday with her daughter. Her British husband, Richard Ratcliffe, and employer, Thomson Reuters Foundation, stressed Johnson had erred. Iran's media seized on Johnson's "confession" and Zaghari-Ratcliffe received a five-year sentence for the charge of subversion.

What happens next? Carla Ferstman, director of Redress, the international human rights organisation advising Richard Ratcliffe, says the UK foreign secretary has "recognise[d] the severity of the

case." Redress, which has supported the family since May 2016, previously commissioned an expert legal brief on how diplomatic protection might apply to Zaghari-Ratcliffe's case. In essence, this would escalate it to a state-to-state matter subject to international law. "It's extremely rare to trigger this procedure," a legal consultant told The Arab Weekly.

The brief was prepared by prominent barristers led by John Dugard, former special rapporteur of the International Law Commission, a UN body. "We have urged the Foreign Office to place Nazanin under the diplomatic protection of the United Kingdom," Juergen Schurr, Redress's head of law and policy, said.

Richard Ratcliffe has backed the move and criticised the government's "softly" approach. He has also sympathised with calls for London to hand Iran £450 million (\$595.6 million) over a 38-year old tank dispute. In 2009, the International Chamber of Commerce ruled that Britain should pay Iran back the funds for a tank deal that failed to materialise in 1979, but international sanctions ostensibly delayed the transfer. The debt was linked to the Zaghari-Ratcliffe case by an unnamed minister quoted by a British tabloid.

Before meeting Ratcliffe ear-

lier this month, Johnson said he "would leave no stone unturned" to secure Zaghari-Ratcliffe's release. However, he has not yet agreed to extend diplomatic protection, with the Foreign Office doubting it would help.

This leaves the case a consular matter, at least for now. But Redress points out that Iran, which does not recognise dual nationality, refuses to let the UK consul in Tehran see Zaghari-Ratcliffe on the grounds she is an Iranian citizen. She is, however, allowed to talk to her husband by phone and to see her young daughter, who is in Iran with her grandparents.

Redress rejects the argument that Zaghari-Ratcliffe is solely Iranian, which has potential implications for other dual nationals held in Iran, including Iranian-American businessman Siamak Namazi and his elderly father, Baquer.

If anything, said Schurr of Redress, "Nazanin has been targeted because of her dual Iranian-UK nationality." He added: "This was the opinion of the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention, of the UN special rapporteur on Iran and of the experts who put together the expert legal brief we released on 23 October 2017." Redress also stressed that the expert brief on diplomatic protection found her predominant nationality to be Brit-

ish, because of her extensive ties to the UK. "This gives the UK the right to assert diplomatic protection, even though the offending state is Iran, the state of Nazanin's other nationality," said Schurr.

This chimes with growing international criticism of Iran's human rights record. On November 14, a UN committee that prepares drafts for the General Assembly passed a resolution condemning "widespread and systematic use of arbitrary detention, including the use of such practices to target dual and foreign nationals."

Among 83 countries in favour were sponsors Canada, the US, the UK, France, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. Among 30 voting against were Iran's allies Syria and Venezuela, as well as China and Russia. Among 68 abstaining were Qatar, Egypt, Chile and Brazil. Many countries vote against or abstain on such votes because they oppose country-specific resolutions or allege double standards.

Schurr said Redress was "not able to comment on the general situation [in Iran] on torture, human rights and respect for judicial norms." But he was clear that Zaghari-Ratcliffe's "fundamental human rights have been violated and this is compounded with every day that passes."

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