

# Understanding the Iranian Threat Network

CDR Hubert Mróz, Polish Navy (CSAG/CCJ5)

*The opinions and conclusions expressed herein are those of a number of international officers within the Combined Strategic Analysis Group (CSAG) and do not necessarily reflect the views of United States Central Command, nor of the nations represented within the CSAG or any other governmental agency.*

## **Key Points**

- The Iranian Threat Network (ITN) poses a complex and multifaceted challenge in the region.
- The significance of the ITN lies in its ability to project influence, sow instability, and undermine security and sovereignty, with far-reaching implications for the geopolitical landscape.
- The ITN is characterized by its remarkable flexibility and adaptability.
- The threat perception of the ITN varies across countries within the CENTCOM AOR.
- CSAG proposes a comprehensive methodology for more nuanced understanding of the ITN.

## **Introduction**

The Iranian Threat Network (ITN) has emerged as a complex and multifaceted challenge in the CENTCOM Area of Operations (AOR). This strategic paper aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the ITN, its models, significance, and the nuanced threat perceptions it engenders across the CENTCOM AOR. Furthermore, it proposes a robust methodology to gauge the ITN threat perspectives of countries in the region and identify opportunities for cooperation to mitigate ITN influence. This paper will explore the various models and manifestations of the ITN, including its state-sponsored elements, proxy forces, and asymmetric capabilities, to develop a holistic understanding of its operational dynamics.

The ITN's significance lies in its ability to project Iranian regime influence, sow instability, and undermine the security and sovereignty of countries within the CENTCOM AOR. This is achieved through malign activities, ranging from usurping sovereign security constructs with shadow security organizations to interference with political processes, with far-reaching implications for the Middle East and beyond.

A key characteristic of the ITN model is its remarkable flexibility and adaptability. The network has demonstrated the capacity to evolve its tactics, techniques, and procedures in response to changing circumstances, posing a dynamic and persistent challenge to regional security. Understanding the ITN's adaptive nature is crucial for developing effective countermeasures.

The perception of the threat from the ITN varies across countries within the CENTCOM AOR, reflecting the complex web of regional dynamics and individual relations with Iran. To better understand the ITN's calibrated efforts and its impact on the CENTCOM AOR, this paper proposes a comprehensive 4-phased methodology. This approach combines literature study, deductive research, inductive research, and abductive research, as well as employing

three analytical models (all described and explained below). By applying this methodology, CENTCOM can develop a more nuanced understanding of the ITN threat and identify opportunities for cooperation to mitigate its influence. This paper builds upon and complements previous research on deterrence strategy, as presented in the 2024 CSAG Strategy Paper titled "Deterring the 'Exquisite Diplomat': Unpacking the Complexities of U.S.-Iran Deterrence Dynamics." In this regard, there may be some repetition of concepts and information between the two papers. However, these repetitions are necessary to ensure that the current paper provides a comprehensive and self-contained exploration of the ITN and its implications, without requiring the reader to refer extensively to the previous work; it's stand alone.

### Taxonomy – the ITN models

The ITN encompasses a diverse array of actors, activities, and objectives that collectively pose a threat to regional stability and U.S. interests. Washington Institute for Near East Policy's ITN model is comprised of Iranian proxies and actors collaborating with Iran to promote its interests globally.<sup>1</sup> This includes groups like Hezbollah, the Houthis in Yemen, Iraqi militias (Hashd al-Shaabi/PMU), as well as the Fatemiyoun and Zainebiyoun – Brigades of Afghan and Pakistani Shia fighters in Syria. Washington Institute emphasizes a complex relationship with Iran, often serving as "power multipliers" for Iran's regional influence. For example, Hezbollah has a presence in the Middle East, Africa, Latin America, and Southeast Asia. According to the Washington Institute, the ITN operates on both a military/operational level as well as a "Dawah" level (proselytization – an attempt to convert people's religious or political beliefs); the "Dawah" level seeks to recruit from Shia communities worldwide, especially where central governments are weak. RAND Corp. developed its "Four Models of Iran's Nonstate Client Partnerships" (see figure 1).<sup>2</sup> The Idea is that Iran has gradually moved into different theaters in the region and leveraged the ITN to remain under the threshold of war and reduce the attribution of activities back to Iran, operating in what is often referred to as the gray zone. Therefore, according to RAND Corp., ITN can be broken into four categories – "Targeters", "Deterrers", "Stabilizers", and "Influencers." These categories correspond to four objectives that serve Iran's interests. The groups may be in several categories at once or move between them as the international and regional landscapes change and Iran alters its objectives. Iran can also pursue several objectives at once and use these groups to perform several tasks and play multiple roles. In that sense the groups that make up the ITN are versatile and serve as "a Swiss Army knife to Iran."<sup>3</sup> A major weakness of the RAND Study and their approach with the four models is that it assumes that all groups are non-state actors. Whereas some of the Iranian proxy groups have party representation and sit in government or parliament including Lebanese Hezbollah<sup>4</sup> and Yemeni Houthis.<sup>5</sup> Through these proxy groups, Iran has been able to gain influence and representation in the governments and parliaments allowing it to further its regional interests.<sup>6</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Omer Carmi, "Deconstructing and Countering Iran's Threat Network," *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, 2017, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/media/1639?disposition=inline> (accessed August 2021).

<sup>2</sup> Ariane M. Tabatabai, Jeffrey Martini, Becca Wasser, "The Iran Threat Network (ITN). Four Models of Iran's Nonstate Client Partnerships," *RAND Corporation*, 2021, [https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research\\_reports/RR4200/RR4231/RAND\\_RR4231.pdf](https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research_reports/RR4200/RR4231/RAND_RR4231.pdf) (accessed August 2021).

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ashley Lane, "Iran's Islamist Proxies in the Middle East," *Wilson Center*, September 12, 2023, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/irans-islamist-proxies> (accessed April 16, 2024).

<sup>5</sup> Nicole Hassenstab, "Understanding Iran's Use of Terrorist Groups as Proxies," *American University*, February 5, 2024, <https://www.american.edu/sis/news/20240205-understanding-irans-use-of-terrorist-groups-as-proxies.cfm> (accessed April 16, 2024).

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

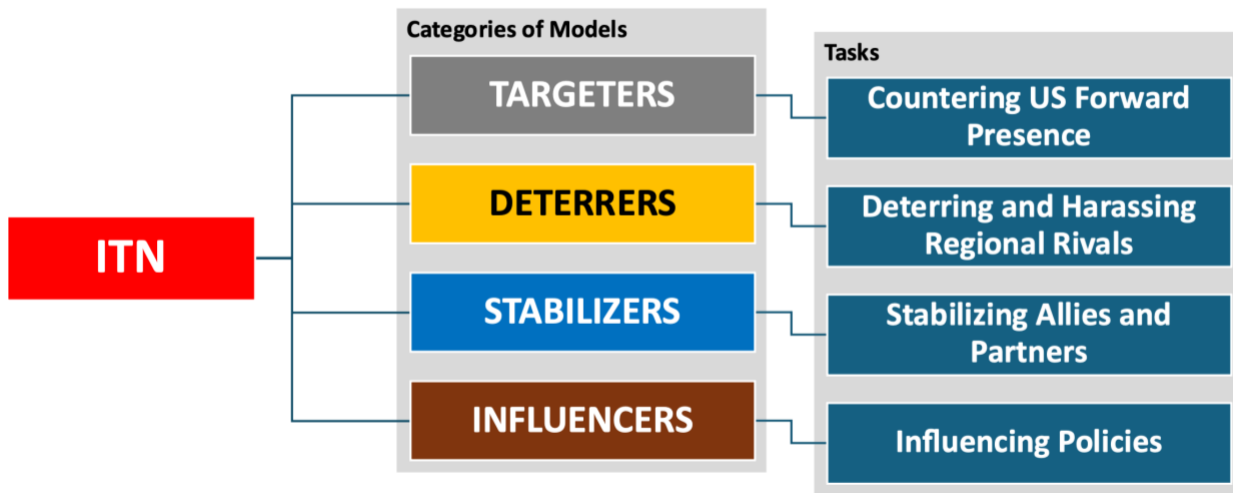


Figure 1. Four Categories of Models of Client-State Relations by RAND Corp.<sup>7</sup>

**Significance of the ITN**

Following RAND’s taxonomy of four models,<sup>8</sup> significance of the ITN can be expressed in four main Strategic Effects (SE) that ITN serves for Iran: to target, to deter, to stabilize and to influence. To target means to raise the costs of the U.S. and of the Coalition military presence in the region. The second SE aims to deter and impose costs on Iran’s regional rivals (e.g., Israel, Saudi Arabia, and UAE). Stabilizing refers to Iran’s allies, such as the Assad regime in Syria. By supporting them and helping them grow stronger, Iran enhances its regional position and boosts its leverage. Finally, influence allows Iran to expand its impact within states regionally and globally.<sup>9</sup> Center of Gravity (COG)<sup>10</sup> analysis can be a useful tool to understand effectiveness of the key deterrents of Iran.<sup>11</sup> If we assume the Iranian regime’s policy – Velayat-e Faqih – as Iran’s Strategic COG, it can also be assumed they pursue the following policies: nuclear ambiguity, circumventing economic sanctions, influencing and gaining by the “diplomacy of terror” (in the region and beyond). The latter also referring to an ability to act while under a thin veil of deniability. The IRGC is of significant importance to the regime in Teheran. The IRGC is particularly valued for its abilities to: project power and influence across the ME and beyond, wage asymmetric warfare, utilize decentralized command, control, and communications (C3), strategic planning and adaptability, and influence the Iranian economic and political domains.

<sup>7</sup> Ariane M. Tabatabai, Jeffrey Martini, Becca Wasser, “The Iran Threat Network (ITN). Four Models of Iran’s Nonstate Client Partnerships,” RAND Corporation, 2021, [https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research\\_reports/RR4200/RR4231/RAND\\_RR4231.pdf](https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research_reports/RR4200/RR4231/RAND_RR4231.pdf) (accessed August 2021).

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> A COG is a source of power that provides moral or physical strength, freedom of action, or a will to act. Joint Publication 5-0 Joint Planning, DOD Dictionary, December 1, 2020, <https://www.jcs.mil/Doctrine/Joint-Doctrine-Pubs/5-0-Planning-Series/> (accessed April 1, 2024).

<sup>11</sup> Daniel J. Smith, Kelley Jeter, Odin Westgaard, “Three Approaches to Center of Gravity Analysis: The Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant,” National Defense University Press, July 1, 2015, <https://ndupress.ndu.edu/Media/News/Article/607722/three-approaches-to-center-of-gravity-analysis-the-islamic-state-of-iraq-and-th/> (accessed April 16, 2024).

For the IRGC to be successful, very often it needs ITN as its operational tool, as an enabler.<sup>12</sup> In relation with the ITN, the Quds Force (IRGC-QF) plays a special role for the IRGC. The proxies are often driven by their own charismatic leaders and often have their own agendas, ideologies, and leadership structures that do not always align with Iran's strategic calculations. Consequently, the solidity of maintaining a command-and-control function over the proxies is uncertain. This concern became more prominent for the IRGC since the death of Qassem Soleimani, as the current IRGC-QF commander (Esmail Qaani) reportedly has less control and esteem.<sup>13</sup> The IRGC-QF focuses on maintaining proxy groups' alignment with Iran's revolutionary ideals. Fighting ideology is often challenging, as it requires offering alternatives and can take generations to change. It's hard to imagine what could be offered to Iran to ensure regional stability and encourage the regime to pursue peace.

### **ITN nature – flexibility and adaptability**

The powerful feature of the ITN groups is their ability to morph between categories. The ITN can adapt its groups to serve different purposes for Iran as circumstances change. Iran leverages the diverse capabilities of ITN groups to achieve a range of objectives. An example of Hezbollah shows the multiform nature of ITN, as Hezbollah carries as much as three different roles of Deterrers, Stabilizers and Influencers. Hezbollah is considered a “power multiplier” for the IRGC,<sup>14</sup> as they can also operate in Africa, Latin America, and the West allowing Iran to project influence globally. Another example is 'Asa'ib Ahl al-Haqq (AAH) aka the League of the Righteous, which operates in Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon, acting as “Targeters” and “Influencers.” The so-called “latest addition to the ITN,” the Fatemiyoun and Zainebiyoun Brigades (Afghan and Pakistani Shia fighters) act as Stabilizers dealing with recruitment, and as Targeters fighting in Syria. Reportedly, Houthis in Yemen used to act as the Deterrers but since October 2023 also as the Targeters posing a threat to SLOC in the Red Sea and Israel with air strikes. Another example is the ITN operatives recruited and active in Europe, especially those Hezbollah related. Iran has used ITN operatives in Europe to conduct espionage, assassination attempts, and terrorist plots.<sup>15</sup> ITN operatives have been involved in spying on Iranian dissidents and exiles living in Europe, threatening and targeting these individuals to silence them.<sup>16</sup> Iran has leveraged mosques, political institutions, and other organizations in Europe as part of its “spying system” to monitor and threaten Iranian dissidents living in Europe.<sup>17</sup> The activities of ITN operatives in Europe demonstrate how Iran uses its network of proxies and partners to project power and influence beyond the Middle East, even in Western countries.

**“Distinctiveness” of the Houthis.** Diversity of the ITN groups is well represented by the Yemeni Houthis movement. While the Houthis receive training, weapons, intelligence, and tactical advice from Iran, they maintain a significant

---

<sup>12</sup> “Deterring the “Exquisite Diplomat”: Unpacking the Complexities of US-Iran Deterrence Dynamics,” *US CENTCOM CSAG*, May 2024.

<sup>13</sup> Michael Knights, Crispin Smith, Hamdi Malik, “Discordance in the Iran Threat Network in Iraq: Militia Competition and Rivalry,” *Combating Terrorism Center*, October 2021, <https://ctc.westpoint.edu/discordance-in-the-iran-threat-network-in-iraq-militia-competition-and-rivalry/> (accessed April 3, 2024).

<sup>14</sup> Omer Carmi, “Deconstructing and Countering Iran’s Threat Network,” *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, 2017, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/media/1639?disposition=inline> (accessed August 2021).

<sup>15</sup> Toby Dershowitz, Benjamin Weinthal, “Iran’s Long, Bloody History of Terror and Espionage in Europe,” *RealClearDefense*, July 25, 2018, [https://www.realcleardefense.com/articles/2018/07/25/irans\\_long\\_bloody\\_history\\_of\\_terror\\_and\\_espionage\\_in\\_europe\\_113652.html](https://www.realcleardefense.com/articles/2018/07/25/irans_long_bloody_history_of_terror_and_espionage_in_europe_113652.html) (accessed April 16, 2024).

<sup>16</sup> “Iranian Regime Agents Threaten Dissident Expats In Europe,” *Iran International*, January 7, 2024, <https://www.iranintl.com/en/202301063775> (accessed April 16, 2024).

<sup>17</sup> “Iran is targeting its opponents in Britain,” *The Economist*, February 8, 2024, <https://www.economist.com/britain/2024/02/08/iran-is-targeting-its-opponents-in-britain> (accessed April 16, 2024).

degree of ideological and political independence from Tehran.<sup>18</sup> The Houthis have their own local roots, goals, and decision-making processes that are not entirely beholden to Iranian interests. The Houthis' alignment with Iran is more pragmatic than ideological. They see Iran as a useful partner against their common adversaries, like Saudi Arabia.<sup>19</sup> The Houthis have demonstrated a willingness to defy Iranian advice when it suits their interests. Reportedly, the Houthis have capitalized on the ongoing conflict between Israel and Hamas to raise their profile and bolster their support, even though this may not fully align with Iran's priorities.<sup>20</sup> This suggests the Houthis are adept at positioning themselves opportunistically. While supported by Iran, the Houthis maintain a significant degree of operational autonomy in planning and executing attacks, especially against maritime targets in the Red Sea.<sup>21</sup> Overall, the Houthis exhibit pragmatic alignment with and more independence from Iran compared to other ITN groups, with their own local roots, and ability to capitalize on regional conflicts to advance their interests. This nuanced relationship with Iran sets the Houthis apart within the broader ITN.

**ITN and CENTCOM – system within systems.** Isolation of ITN groups is difficult in a network where political, diplomatic, and military connections throughout security cooperation are set. Simply put, they become more integrated into nations' governments and militaries. Unfortunately, sometimes good intentions take an unpredictable negative turn. For instance, the U.S. has indeed provided significant support to the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) as part of its broader strategy to strengthen Lebanon's sovereignty and security. However, this support has also been criticized for inadvertently benefiting Lebanese Hezbollah (LH). The LAF have indeed faced significant challenges related to the infiltration and influence of Hezbollah within their ranks. This situation complicates the LAF's role and effectiveness, particularly in enforcing sovereignty and countering Hezbollah's dominance in certain areas of Lebanon. LH has systematically recruited commanders and other personnel within the Lebanese army. This recruitment strategy allows Hezbollah to use the army's infrastructure and military resources to coordinate activities that align with its interests, often under the guise of legitimate operations. For instance, LH has reportedly built military surveillance towers along the border with Israel, claiming environmental initiatives while serving military purposes.<sup>22</sup> Moreover, Hezbollah's infiltration grants them access to advanced Western weaponry and technology, which were originally supplied to the Lebanese Army by Western nations. This includes security radars at Beirut International Airport and equipment from the Lebanese Navy, which Hezbollah accessed with the cooperation of Lebanese Army officers.<sup>23</sup> The economic distress of the Lebanese Army further exacerbates this issue. Lebanon's economic challenges have made the army increasingly dependent on international aid, which includes funding for soldiers' salaries and logistical support. This dependency creates vulnerabilities that Hezbollah can exploit by appealing to impecunious soldiers across different community lines.<sup>24</sup> This is indicative of the complexity of the ITN

---

<sup>18</sup> Samia Nakhoul, Parisa Hafezi, "Iranian and Hezbollah Commanders Help Direct Houthi Attacks in Yemen," *Reuters*, January 20, 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/iranian-hezbollah-commanders-help-direct-houthi-attacks-yemen-sources-say-2024-01-20/> (accessed May 8, 2024).

<sup>19</sup> Samia Nakhoul, Parisa Hafezi, "Iranian and Hezbollah Commanders Help Direct Houthi Attacks in Yemen," *Reuters*, January 20, 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/iranian-hezbollah-commanders-help-direct-houthi-attacks-yemen-sources-say-2024-01-20/> (accessed May 8, 2024).

<sup>20</sup> Kali Robinson, "Iran's Support of the Houthis: What to Know," *The Council on Foreign Relations*, March 1, 2024, <https://www.cfr.org/in-brief/irans-support-houthis-what-know> (accessed May 8, 2024).

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Dana Polak Kanarik, "Is The Lebanese Army Capable of Enforcing a New Political Outline in Southern Lebanon and Being a Counterweight to Hezbollah?" *Alma Research and Education Center*, March 4, 2024, <https://israel-alma.org/2024/03/04/is-the-lebanese-army-capable-of-enforcing-a-new-political-outline-in-southern-lebanon-and-being-a-counterweight-to-hezbollah/> (accessed May 7, 2024).

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

and makes a point that the RAND study’s recommendation to only exert an effect on the Targeters was not realistic because it was not having any significant impact on the ITN. In fact, it is similar to cutting tentacles off an octopus, a short-term remedy instead of a long-term solution. A provocative yet possible conclusion is that in a way, the U.S. contributes to a system of which the ITN is a part.<sup>25</sup>

**Nuanced Perceptions of the ITN Threat in the CENTCOM AOR<sup>26</sup>**

The perceived threat of the ITN varies across countries within the CENTCOM AOR (see figure 2). This is largely influenced by the individual relations between each country and Iran. Less resilient countries in the region may pragmatically choose to partner with Iran, even if they do not support Iran's malign regional activities.<sup>27</sup> This is a strategic decision, as these countries perceive it as safer to have Iran as a partner rather than an adversary, to avoid conflict with Iran. This creates a type of "false friendship" between these countries and Iran, but it is a pragmatic choice for them given their circumstances. Given this nuance, a high threat assessment of the ITN should not systematically drive operations, activities, and investments in the region. Rather, a combination of security cooperation and threat mitigation efforts would better serve U.S. interests and respond to the individual security concerns of regional countries. This tailored approach can help build trust and enhance partnerships with regional countries, rather than alienating them by solely focusing on the ITN threat. It recognizes the complex regional dynamics and pragmatic considerations that shape each country's relationship with Iran.

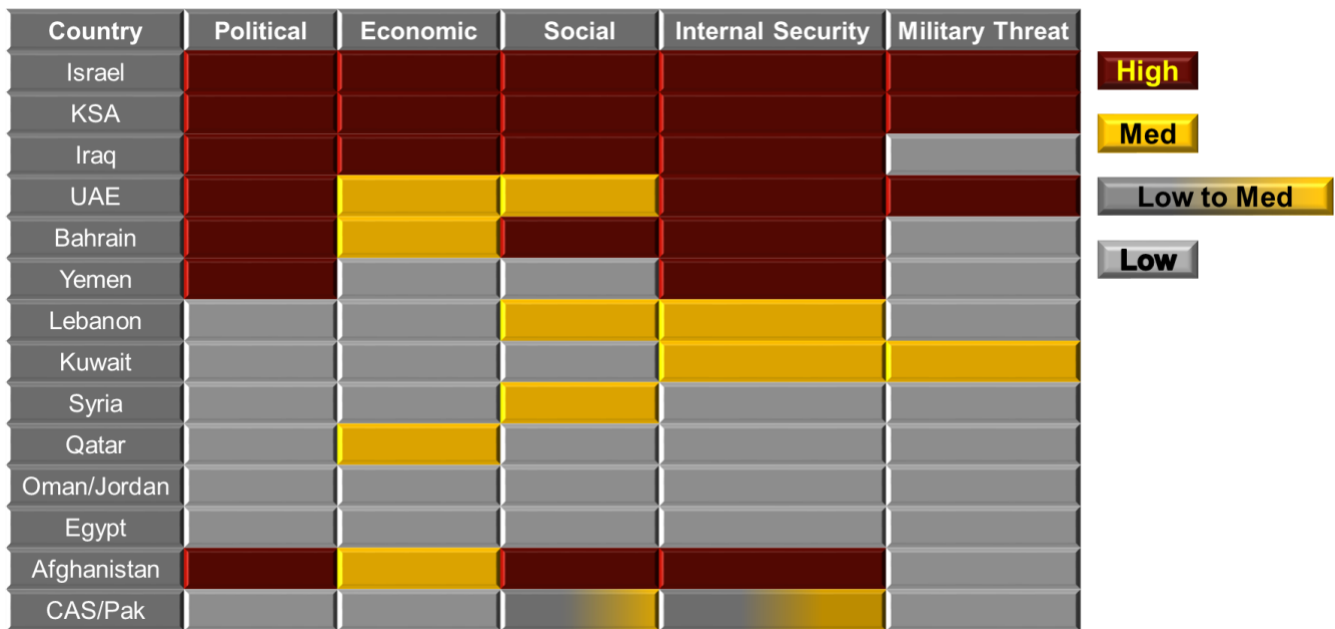


Figure 2. ITN Threat Perceptions in the CENTCOM AOR – an example. Source: CSAG November 2021.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> “Deterring the “Exquisite Diplomat”: Unpacking the Complexities of US-Iran Deterrence Dynamics,” *US CENTCOM CSAG*, May 2024.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid. Also in 2021, CSAG conducted an independent study on the perception of the ITN threat, that confirmed the claim of different threat apprehension by different countries in the AOR.



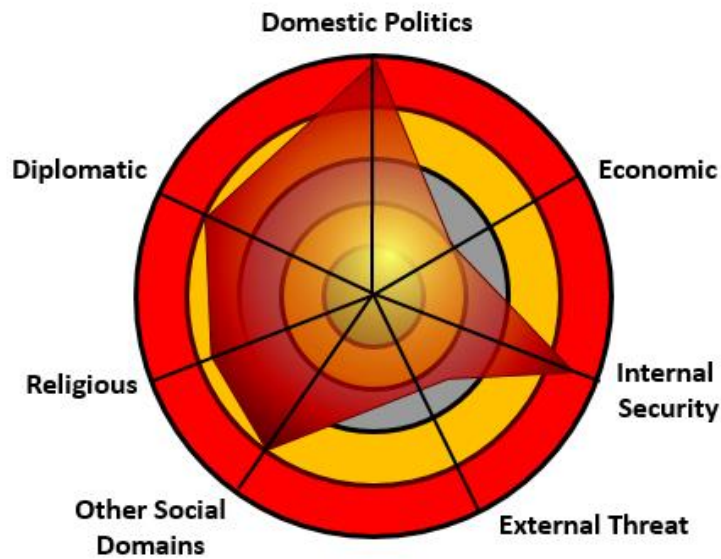


Figure 3. Functional approach-model applied to the Houthis in Yemen – an example. Source: CSAG November 2021.

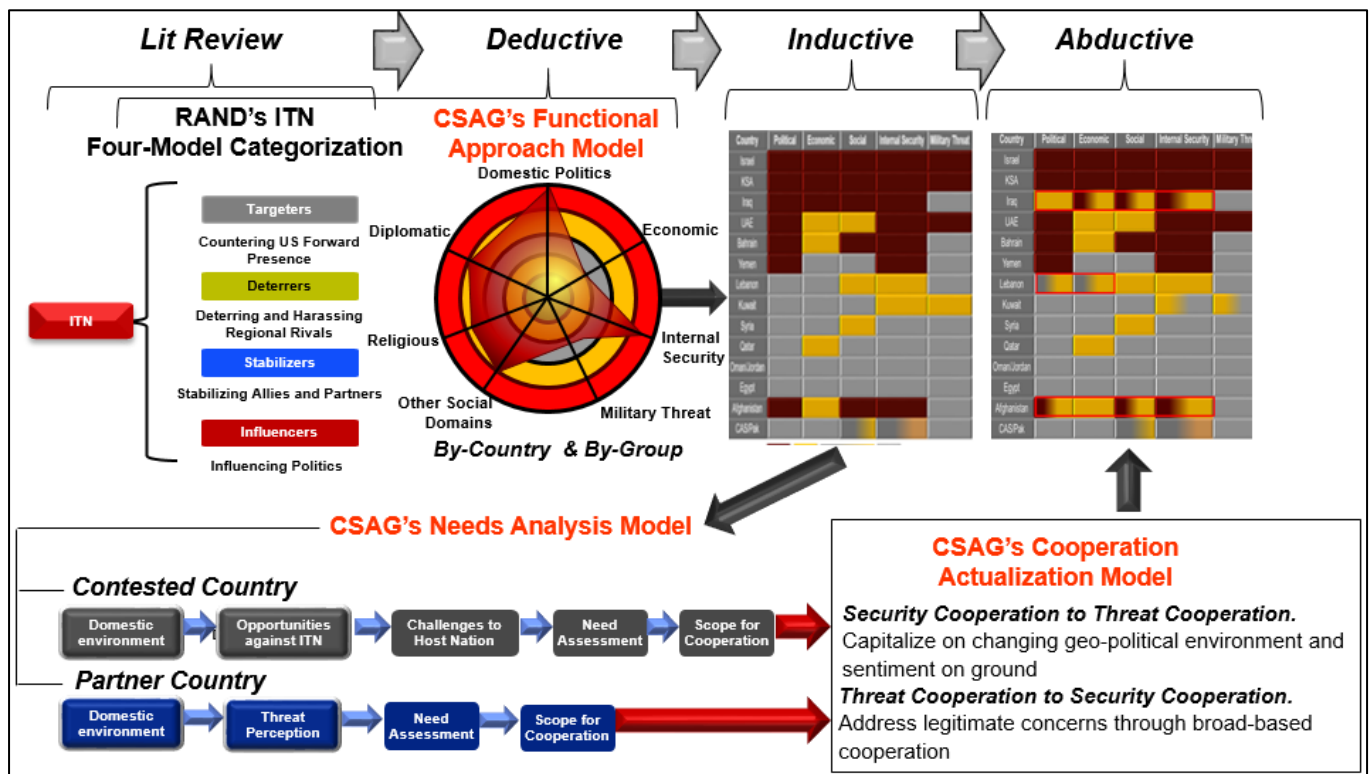


Figure 4. An optimal methodology to understand ITN calibrated efforts. Source: CSAG November 2021.

### An optimal methodology to understand ITN

CSAG proposes 4-phased comprehensive methodology to better understand ITN calibrated efforts (see figure 4). Those four phases are: (I) literature study, (II) deductive research, (III) inductive research and (IV) abductive research with three analytic models: (a) “Functional Approach Model”, (b) “Needs Analysis Model”, and (c) “Cooperation Actualization Model”.

1. **Literature study.** In phase I, “Four Models of Iran’s Nonstate Client Partnerships” by the RAND Corp, can serve to roughly categorize a particular ITN group in its current role and/or task.<sup>28</sup> Literature study geared by the four models of ITN, aims to learn current state of knowledge, identifying gaps in existing research, situating the research within the broader scholarly context, developing the theoretical framework for the research, and formulating research questions and hypotheses that need further investigation.
2. **Deductive research.** Deductive reasoning is a logical approach that starts with general ideas or theories and works towards specific conclusions through inferences.<sup>29</sup> In phase II, for a better understanding of the role of a particular group and to avoid the limitations of generalizing the ITN, CSAG proposes a “Functional Approach Model” (see figure 3). It can be complementary to the RAND’s “four models” categorization of ITN groups. Use of a “spider web diagram methodology” to examine each ITN group across different domains, such as domestic politics, economics, internal security, external threats, social, religious, and diplomatic, would better capture ITN groups nuances of metamorphosis and serving multiple functions simultaneously. Research in phase II can start with general theories or models about the causes and characteristics of an ITN group.<sup>30</sup> From these general theories, specific, testable hypotheses about the motivations, structures, and behaviors of an ITN group can be developed. Once hypotheses are formed, the hypotheses can be tested with empirical data collected through methods like interviews, document analysis, and statistical analysis. Subsequently, it should be tested whether the real-world data supports or contradicts the initial hypotheses. When in a significant occurrence (e.g., a terrorist attack) the perpetrating organization is unknown, deductive reasoning can be used to narrow down the possibilities. By analyzing the characteristics of the attack and comparing them to the known traits of different terrorist groups, it can be deduced which organization was likely responsible.<sup>31</sup> Understanding the unique features of a particular ITN organization through deductive research can help to devise more effective, context-oriented responses, rather than relying on generic, one-size-fits-all approaches.
3. **Inductive research.** Inductive reasoning involves drawing general conclusions from specific observations or data.<sup>32</sup> While using inductive method in phase III, this step aims to recognize nuanced ITN threat perceptions for

<sup>28</sup> Ariane M. Tabatabai, Jeffrey Martini, Becca Wasser, “The Iran Threat Network (ITN). Four Models of Iran’s Nonstate Client Partnerships,” RAND Corporation, 2021, [https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research\\_reports/RR4200/RR4231/RAND\\_RR4231.pdf](https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research_reports/RR4200/RR4231/RAND_RR4231.pdf) (accessed August 2021).

<sup>29</sup> Murat Koçak, “The Application of Q Methodology to Generate a Functional Typology of Terrorist Organizations in Turkey,” Kent State University, December 2010, [https://etd.ohiolink.edu/acprod/odb\\_etd/ws/send\\_file/send?accession=kent1286681075&disposition=attachment](https://etd.ohiolink.edu/acprod/odb_etd/ws/send_file/send?accession=kent1286681075&disposition=attachment) (accessed April 29, 2024).

<sup>30</sup> Randy Borum, “Psychology of Terrorism,” University of South Florida, October 2003, <https://www.ojp.gov/pdffiles1/nij/grants/208551.pdf> (accessed April 29, 2024).

<sup>31</sup> Murat Koçak, “The Application of Q Methodology to Generate a Functional Typology of Terrorist Organizations in Turkey,” Kent State University, December 2010, [https://etd.ohiolink.edu/acprod/odb\\_etd/ws/send\\_file/send?accession=kent1286681075&disposition=attachment](https://etd.ohiolink.edu/acprod/odb_etd/ws/send_file/send?accession=kent1286681075&disposition=attachment) (accessed April 29, 2024).

<sup>32</sup> Inductive research is a method of developing theories or generalizations based on specific observations or data. It begins with data collection and identifies patterns to form new theories or hypotheses. Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, “Inductive Logic,” Stanford University, March 19, 2018, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/logic-inductive/> (accessed April 28, 2024).



each country in the AOR separately. By analyzing data and information from various sources, such as government reports, academic studies, and media coverage, patterns and trends can be identified in how countries in the AOR perceive the ITN threat. This can help to develop a more comprehensive understanding of the factors that shape these perceptions. Inductive reasoning can be used to generate hypotheses about the factors that influence a country's perception of the ITN threat. For example, researchers might hypothesize that a country's level of modernization, political system, or historical experiences with terrorism or activity of a ITN group, could be related to its threat perception.<sup>33</sup> Inductive reasoning allows to explore the contextual factors that may contribute to a country's threat perception, such as geographical location, social and cultural dynamics, and the presence of other forms of unrest.<sup>34</sup> By observing patterns and trends in the data, hypotheses can be developed about potential causal relationships between various factors and a country's threat perception. These hypotheses can then be tested through further research and analysis.<sup>35</sup> The insights gained from inductive reasoning can help inform the development of more effective counter-ITN strategies by identifying the specific factors that shape a country's threat perception and the ways in which these perceptions can be influenced.<sup>36</sup> Having learned the nuanced ITN threat perceptions in the CENTCOM AOR by the countries, following step is the "Needs Assessment Model" with two simultaneous stages: "partner country" and "contested country."<sup>37</sup> Those two stages aim to find scope for cooperation, separately for partner and contested countries in AOR. For a **contested country**, the process starts with understanding the domestic environment, then finding opportunities for working against ITN, defining challenges to a host country, then assessing the host country needs and finally finding scope for cooperation. Based on that, the "Cooperation Actualization Model" can be applied aiming to capitalize on changing geo-political environment and sentiment on the ground to shift from Security Cooperation<sup>38</sup> to Threat Cooperation.<sup>39</sup> For a **partner country**, the process starts also with knowing domestic environment, then assessment of the country's threat perception, followed by needs assessment, and finally finding scope for

---

<sup>33</sup> Andrew Denovan, Neil Dagnall, Kenneth Drinkwater, Andrew Parker, Peter Clough, "Perception of Risk and Terrorism-Related Behavior Change: Dual Influences of Probabilistic Reasoning and Reality Testing," *Frontiers in Psychology*, October 4, 2017, <https://www.frontiersin.org/journals/psychology/articles/10.3389/fpsyg.2017.01721/full> (accessed April 29, 2024).

<sup>34</sup> Randy Borum, "Psychology of Terrorism," *University of South Florida*, October 2003, <https://www.ojp.gov/pdffiles1/nij/grants/208551.pdf> (accessed April 29, 2024).

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Andrew Denovan, Neil Dagnall, Kenneth Drinkwater, Andrew Parker, Peter Clough, "Perception of Risk and Terrorism-Related Behavior Change: Dual Influences of Probabilistic Reasoning and Reality Testing," *Frontiers in Psychology*, October 4, 2017, <https://www.frontiersin.org/journals/psychology/articles/10.3389/fpsyg.2017.01721/full> (accessed April 29, 2024).

<sup>37</sup> A country or territory where there is a dispute or conflict over its sovereignty, borders, or control. The search results provide several examples of contested countries, such as Palestine, Lebanon, Syria, Yemen, and the Kashmir region between India and Pakistan. These territories are characterized by ongoing conflicts, the presence of multiple factions or groups vying for power and influence, and a lack of clear, internationally recognized authority or government. Devorah Manekin, Guy Grossman, Tamar Mitts, "Contested Ground: Disentangling Material and Symbolic Attachment to Disputed Territory," *Cambridge University Press*, June 12, 2018 <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/political-science-research-and-methods/article/abs/contested-ground-disentangling-material-and-symbolic-attachment-to-disputed-territory/51547A284177A0B4E84B76E1929A0C51> (accessed April 16, 2024).

<sup>38</sup> "Security Cooperation" refers to the broad category of activities undertaken by the U.S. Department of Defense to develop partnerships and enable partner nations to act in support of U.S. security interests. It includes efforts to build partner capacity, security force assistance, and defense institution building. Source: "Select RAND Research on Security Cooperation 2006-2019," *RAND Corp.*, October 7, 2021, [https://www.rand.org/pubs/corporate\\_pubs/CPA614-3.html](https://www.rand.org/pubs/corporate_pubs/CPA614-3.html) (accessed October 12, 2021).

<sup>39</sup> "Threat Cooperation" is a made-up by CSAG term, invented for research purposes, that is not used in the security and defense policy literature. It refers to joint activities aimed at reducing a specific threat to a specific developing country at a specific time. Etymology and the origin of the idea ties in with the U.S. Department of Defense program – Cooperative Threat Reduction (CTR), that works cooperatively with partner governments to reduce the certain threats, including from weapons of mass destruction (WMD). Source: "Cooperative Threat Reduction Directorate," *Defense Threat Reduction Agency (DTRA)*, Official website of DTRA, <https://www.dtra.mil/About/Mission/Cooperative-Threat-Reduction/> (accessed October 12, 2021).

cooperation. While applying the “Cooperation Actualization Model” for a partner country, the desired shift is from Threat Cooperation to Security Cooperation, which then addresses legitimate concerns through broad-based cooperation. The implementation of the defined scope of cooperation within the “Actualization Model” should facilitate an effective transition from “Security Cooperation” to “Threat Cooperation” in the case of a “contested country”, and from “Threat Cooperation” back to “Security Cooperation” in the case of a “partner country.” This scope for cooperation should encompass specific countermeasures against the ITN, as the process, spanning phases I to III, is customarily tailored to the specific country and its operational environment where the ITN operates. This transition is expected to alter the ITN threat perception in the “contested country,” thereby creating a conducive environment for fostering developmental changes within the “contested country” and enhancing cooperation with the “partner country.” Moreover, this process promotes a comprehensive understanding of the ITN group, thereby augmenting the country's resilience to the impacts posed by the ITN group.

4. **Abductive research.** Phase IV involves an abductive approach which allows moving back and forth between outcomes received within deductive (Phase II) and inductive examination (Phase III) to find the most likely explanation for a surprising observation or phenomenon. Abductive reasoning is an iterative process that involves constantly revisiting and refining theories and hypotheses as new evidence emerges. This flexibility allows researchers to adapt their models to better reflect the realities on the ground.<sup>40</sup> Abductive reasoning can leverage a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods, enabling researchers to develop “thick descriptions”<sup>41</sup> of the social processes involved in security threat perceptions. This methodological triangulation can produce more robust and nuanced findings.<sup>42</sup> Compared to purely deductive or inductive approaches, abductive reasoning is well-suited for studying contemporary, complex issues where the context and phenomena are deeply intertwined, as is often the case with evolving terrorist threat landscapes.<sup>43</sup> Applying these principles to the ITN Threat Perceptions in the CENTCOM AOR, an abductive approach would allow to:
  - a) Observe patterns and anomalies in the data on Iranian-backed threats, terrorist activities, and regional security dynamics.
  - b) Generate preliminary hypotheses to explain these observations, drawing on existing theories as well as new insights.
  - c) Test and refine these hypotheses through a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods, such as case studies, field experiments, and data analysis.
  - d) Iteratively revisit and update the theoretical models as new evidence emerges, ensuring the research remains responsive to the changing realities on the ground.

## Conclusion

CENTCOM alongside USG colleagues should adopt a comprehensive methodology to develop a more nuanced understanding of the ITN threat perceptions within the CENTCOM AOR. This approach necessitates an in-depth examination of each ITN group individually, as their motivations, objectives, and operational dynamics may vary significantly. CENTCOM possesses the means and capability to effectively target groups posing a military threat

---

<sup>40</sup> D. M. Silva, “Governing Terrorism through Preemption: A Comparative Analysis of Radicalization in Three Western Liberal Democracies,” *University of South Carolina*, 2017, <https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/etd/4278> (accessed April 29, 2024).

<sup>41</sup> “Thick description” refers to the detailed, contextual account of a phenomenon that captures the nuances and complexities of the social setting. It goes beyond just describing the “what” to also explain the “how” and “why”; Evers, Jeanine C., “Elaborating on Thick Analysis: About Thoroughness and Creativity in Qualitative Analysis,” *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung*, 2016, <http://nbn-resolving.de/urn:nbn:de:0114-fqs160163> (accessed April 29, 2024).

<sup>42</sup> Ibid 39.

<sup>43</sup> J. Thompson, “A Guide to Abductive Thematic Analysis. The Qualitative Report,” *Nova Southeastern University*, 2022, <https://doi.org/10.46743/2160-3715/2022.5340> (accessed April 29, 2024).

through its fighting resources. While groups specialized or oriented to instruments of national power (DIME)<sup>44</sup> other than military, require a broader intergovernmental effort involving agencies beyond the military and CENTCOM alone. These groups may necessitate diplomatic, economic, or other non-kinetic approaches to counter their influence effectively. All kinetic actions undertaken by CENTCOM must be backed by a solid, operationalized strategy towards the region, encompassing intergovernmental efforts and smart diplomacy towards Iran. This comprehensive approach ensures that military operations are aligned with broader strategic objectives and supported by non-military instruments of national power. It is crucial to recognize that a high ITN threat assessment should not automatically drive operations. The threat perception is nuanced across the region, and a tailored approach is necessary to counter the ITN effectively. This approach should aim to build trust and enhance partnerships with regional countries, rather than alienating them by solely focusing on countering the ITN and deterring Iran. By adopting a comprehensive methodology that considers the nuances of each ITN group, leverages intergovernmental efforts, maintains robust political support, and fosters regional partnerships, the U.S. and CENTCOM can develop a more effective strategy to address the ITN in the CENTCOM AOR. This approach not only enhances operational effectiveness while harboring finite resources but also promotes regional stability and strengthens alliances in the region.

---

<sup>44</sup> The Instruments of National Power – the ‘DIME’ acronym (diplomatic, informational, military, and economic) has been used for many years to describe the instruments of national power. Despite how long the DIME has been used for describing the instruments of national power, US policy makers and strategists have long understood that there are many more instruments involved in national security policy development and implementation. New acronyms such as MIDFIELD (military, informational, diplomatic, financial, intelligence, economic, law, and development) convey a much broader array of options for the strategic and policymaker to use; Joint Doctrine Note 1-18, “Strategy,” April 25, 2018, [https://www.jcs.mil/Portals/36/Documents/Doctrine/jdn\\_jg/jdn1\\_18.pdf](https://www.jcs.mil/Portals/36/Documents/Doctrine/jdn_jg/jdn1_18.pdf) (accessed May 13, 2024).