

Iran-Aligned Foreign Terrorist Organizations

An NCITE Report on New FTO Designations

As the Department of Homeland Security's center of excellence focused on counterterrorism, NCITE's mission is to work with homeland security partners to provide scientific insights on terrorists and other illicit actors that pose a threat to U.S. homeland security and defense. The intent of this report is to support government, law enforcement, and policymakers tasked with protecting the U.S. from terrorism and related threat actors with information on: 1) the **threat actors** and characteristics associated with Iran-aligned foreign terrorist organizations; 2) the **tactics**, technology, and innovation they use to cause harm; and 3) the types of **targets** they may attack, and the potential threat of violence against the U.S. and our allies, both locally and abroad, by Iran-aligned FTOs.

New FTO Designations: Iran-Aligned Militia Groups

On March 5, 2025, the U.S. Department of State announced the designation of the Iran-aligned militia group, Ansar Allah (commonly referred to as the Houthis), as a Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO).ⁱ Ansar Allah had previously been designated in 2021 and was delisted later that year. On September 18, 2025, the State Department designated four additional Iran-aligned militia groups in Iraq— Harakat Ansar Allah al-Awfiya (HAAA), Harakat al-Nujaba (HAN), Kata'ib Sayyid al-Shuhada (KSS), and Kata'ib al-Imam Ali (KIA)— as FTOs.ⁱⁱ These groups are among a number of Iran-aligned FTOs that were previously designated by the U.S., including Hamas, Hezbollah, and other groups within the Axis of Resistance.ⁱⁱⁱ Iran has been designated by the U.S. as a State Sponsor of Terrorism since 1984. These additional FTO designations underscore the growing concern from the about Iran-aligned threat actors.

Harakat Ansar Allah al-Awfiya

Harakat Ansar Allah al-Awfiya (also known as AAA, or HAAA) is the 19th Brigade of the Iraqi Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF). AAA was formed in 2013 as a political organization in the Maysan Province under the name Kayan al-Sadiq wa al-Ataa. The group has also been known as Harakat al-Sadiq wa al-Ataa and uses this name as its political front. AAA is led by Haydar Muzhir Ma'lak al-Sa'idi (aka Haydar al-Gharawi). In 2023, Gharawi was one of eight *muqawama* leaders to meet with Iran's supreme leader, Ali Khamenei.^{iv} AAA is one of several the Iraq-based militia groups that reports to the IRGC and Khamenei.

AAA has been involved in attacks on U.S. personnel as part of the Islamic Resistance in Iraq (IRI), an umbrella network of Iran backed militias in Iraq formed to counter the United States and Israel following the October 7, 2023, Hamas attack on Israel. The U.S. Department of State cites AAA for participating in operations in Iraq and Syria targeting U.S. military personnel between October 2023 and January 2024. Among those attacks, AAA participated in the January 2024 drone strike that killed three U.S. servicemembers at Tower 22 in Jordan. The group has a close relationship with other IRI militia groups, including Kata'ib Hezbollah and Asa'ib ahl al-Haq. AAA has also publicly stated they will continue to attack U.S. interests in the region.

Harakat Hezbollah al-Nujaba

Harakat Hezbollah al-Nujaba (HHN), also known as Harakat al-Nujaba (HN or HAN), is an Iranian-backed militia formed in 2013 by Akram al-Kaabi, who is also a co-founder of the IRGC-backed Asaib Ahl al-Haq (AAH). HHN is a member of the Islamic Resistance in Iraq (IRI) and is the 12th Brigade of the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) of Iraq. It has no political wing. HHN is considered to be subordinate to and partly financed by the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). During the Syrian civil war HHN units fighting against the Islamic State were said to be under the direct operational and administrative control of the IRGC and to maintain close ties with Hezbollah.

In 2023, HHN launched drone attacks on U.S. bases in Syria and Iraq, causing the death of an American contractor. In January 2024, the U.S. struck HHN's headquarters in Baghdad, killing a major leader. HHN frequently issues threats against the U.S.; for example, in January 2026 Akram al-Kaabi stated that a military attack on Iran would provoke deadly retaliation: "If the battle begins, those who started it will not end it; rather, revenge will pass from generation to generation, expanding until it reaches your countries and your homes, and no one will escape it." (Harakat al-Nujaba Telegram channel, January 28, 2026). The group is said to use armored vehicles, older-model tanks, unmanned aircraft systems (UAS), antitank missiles, light arms, midrange machineguns, mortars, vehicle-mounted rocket launchers, and long-range artillery rockets.

Kata'ib Sayyid al-Shuhada

Kata'ib Sayyid al-Shuhada (KSS) is an Iraq-based group that formed in 2013. Its leaders include Abu Mustafa al-Sheibani (who was listed as a Specially Designated Global Terrorist as early as 2008) and Abu Ala al-Wal'ai (nom de guerre of Hashim Banyan ul Awliya). KSS is closely tied to the IRGC as well as Hezbollah, both of which have provided financial and military assistance. They were active in Syria against the Islamic State, as well as in Iraq. KSS is the 14th Brigade of the Popular Mobilization Units, as well as a member of the Islamic Resistance in Iraq (IRI). Its political wing is Muntasirun, which is represented in Parliament in the Khadamat Alliance. KSS has had representation in the Iraqi Parliament since 2014 and is a member of the Coordination Framework, which since 2025 controls the largest bloc in Parliament.

KSS is intensely loyal to Iran and has more expansive regional ambitions than other militia groups, calling for the liberation of Jerusalem and threatening Saudi Arabia. It is also allied with the Houthis in Yemen. In 2021 and 2023, the U.S. launched air strikes against bases used by KSS to retaliate for attacks on American forces. In September 2025, KSS threatened to attack the U.S. Embassy in Iraq if Israel struck targets on Iraqi territory.

Kata'ib al-Imam Ali

Kata'ib al-Imam Ali (KIA) was established in 2014 as the military branch of political party Harakat al-Iraq al-Islamiyah. It is led by Shibl al-Zaydi (or Zaidi), who is also a commander in the Popular Mobilization Forces, of which KIA is the 40th Brigade. Al-Zaydi is also a leader of the Khadamat Alliance, which won five seats in Iraq's 2025 parliamentary elections. Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, the nom de guerre of Jamal Jaafar Ibrahim, who co-founded KIA, was killed in the American airstrike

in January 2020 that also killed Iranian Quds Force commander Qassem Soleimani. KIA members have trained in Iran and with Hezbollah. KAI was engaged in Syria and Iraq against the Islamic State, often to protect Shi'ite shrines. Like KSS, KIA openly supports Iran and Supreme Leader Khamenei.

Ansar Allah (Houthis)

Ansar Allah (also known as the Houthis) is a Shia movement that has been fighting the Sunni led government in Yemen since 2004. The Houthis objected to the Yemeni government's support for the American invasion of Iraq in 2003. The Houthis are led by Abdul-Malik al-Houthi. Iran began supporting the Houthis as early as 2009, and in 2015 provided technological support to help the Houthis' develop new missile variants, both short and extended range. In 2017, the Houthis fired a ballistic missile at Riyadh, and in 2018 and 2019 they attacked oil tankers and oil installations, shifting to more reliance on unmanned aerial systems (UAS) over missiles.

The U.S. first designated the Houthis as a terrorist organization in 2021, though it was delisted one month later. The Houthis have an established command and control system, and many of their commanders received specialized training in Iran. Prior to the October 7, 2023, attack in Israel, the Houthis were positioned to win the civil war and were in negotiations for a ceasefire. The 2023 Hamas attack in Israel and the ensuing Gaza war ended the process. In support of Hamas, the Houthis launched drone and missile attacks against Israel, including a strike on Tel Aviv and one on Ben Gurion International Airport. The Houthis also began attacking commercial shipping in the Red Sea. These attacks and ones on U.S. military personnel were cited as reasons for designating Ansar Allah as an FTO in 2025.

Strategic Context: The Iran-Backed Axis of Resistance

The Axis of Resistance—Iran's proxy network in the Middle East comprised of Iran-aligned militia groups, terrorist organizations, and other illicit actors—pose a persistent threat to U.S. security and to the security of American allies, particularly Israel. Iran provides material support to these groups, including financial support, weapons, training, and intelligence. The Axis of Resistance consists of major non-state actors Hezbollah, Hamas, Palestinian Islamic Jihad, and the Yemeni Houthis, as well as numerous smaller but sizable Iraqi Shi'a militant groups linked in the umbrella organization Islamic Resistance of Iraq (IRI), including the four Iraqi groups designated as FTOs in 2025 and two previously designated groups in Iraq.

The Hamas terrorist attacks on Israel in October 2023 led to the Israeli military degradation of Hamas and occupation of the Gaza strip, which weakened the Axis of Resistance. After launching an offensive against Israel in support of Hamas, Hezbollah also was severely degraded, including the loss of important military commanders and their overall leader, Hassan Nasrallah. Despite these losses, the Axis of Resistance maintains tactical capabilities that pose a security threat to Israel and U.S. interests in the Middle East.

Tactical Sophistication and Targets

Despite regulations on non-state actors' use of militarized drones and weapons, state sponsorship by Iran and network access to other proxies with more sophisticated UAS-technology have enabled

adoption of UAS by groups within the Axis of Resistance.^{vi} An analysis by NCITE^{vii} examining UAS attacks between 2018-2024 found that globally, the Houthis, Hezbollah, and the IRI were among the top ten terrorist groups using weaponized drones. The Houthis—who were the most frequent user of weaponized drones— have employed UAS technology to conduct cross-border attacks on critical infrastructure, with short-range drones commonly used to attack civilian airports, while long-range drones are used to target hydrocarbon infrastructure and other targets within the energy sector.^{viii}

In 2022, the Houthis conducted a missile and drone attack near Abu Dhabi airport, setting off explosions in fuel trucks and killing three people. They also conducted a series of drone and missile strikes against Aramco facilities and other energy sites in Saudi Arabia. After the 2023 attack on Israel by Hamas, the Houthis initiated multiple attacks against foreign-owned commercial vessels as well as U.S. war ships passing through the Bab el-Mandeb Strait, the narrow body of water that separates Yemen from the coast of Africa. Estimates range from 100-500 attacks, which seriously disrupted international shipping. In Israel, attacks have targeted military bases and ports, such as Haifa.

Regional Violence

U.S. interests abroad will continue to be at heightened risk of violence from Iran-aligned FTOs. Following military action on February 28, 2026, reports indicate that Hezbollah and other Iran-aligned FTOs have already engaged in regional attacks.^{ix} Hezbollah’s involvement and statements from the IRGC regarding the death of Iran’s supreme leader may embolden other Iran-aligned groups to mobilize. The IRI released a statement that claimed responsibility for 16 drone attacks on bases in Iraq and the region.^x Several militia groups within the IRI, including the newly designated FTOs, KSS and HHN, have released memorials for the supreme leader Khamenei and announced plans to join the fight in response to attacks on Iran.^{xi}

Regional targets like U.S. military bases and embassies remain at elevated risk in the current climate, and the involvement of FTOs introduces the potential for cross-border UAS attacks on civilian spaces or critical infrastructure. Experts have noted that there appears to be a concerted effort since the February 28 strikes by Iran and proxy groups to attack the regional energy sector, including oil production facilities and supply chains.^{xi} On March 3, the U.S. State Department has urged Americans in 14 countries across the Middle East to depart as soon as possible, and ordered the mandatory departure of non-emergency personnel in six countries due to security concerns.

What Does This Mean for U.S. Homeland Security and Defense?

The conflict with Iran in the Middle East elevates the threat posed by Iran and Iran-aligned FTOs to the U.S. homeland. Attacks within the U.S. are likely to come from three threat vectors: cyberthreats, directed attacks by Iran and/or Iran-aligned FTOs, or homegrown violent extremism inspired by the current conflict.

Cyberthreats

Iran and proxy groups maintain cyber capabilities that have been used to engage in cyberattacks against the U.S. For instance, following the October 7, 2023, attack on Israel, Iran-aligned proxies conducted numerous cyberattacks on both Israel and the U.S.^{xii} The tactics used for these cyberattacks ranged from unsophisticated distributed denial-of-service (DDoS) to advanced destructive campaigns targeting operational technology and industrial control systems. Targets of these attacks in the U.S. were predominantly in the critical infrastructure sectors, including water and wastewater, energy, food and beverage manufacturing, and healthcare and public health sectors.^{xiii}

A joint cybersecurity advisory issued by the Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA), the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), and the National Security Agency (NSA) in 2025 noted the elevated threat of cyber activity in the U.S. attributed to Iran or Iran-aligned threat actors, particularly targeting critical infrastructure sectors and Defense Industrial Base (DIB) companies with relationships to Israeli research and defense firms.^{xiv} Since the military action on February 28 that resulted in the death of the supreme leader of Iran, U.S. threat assessments have cautioned about the increased likelihood of cyberattacks from Iran and Iran-aligned proxies. High-impact critical infrastructure (particularly the energy sector, transportation sector, and telecommunications) and high-accessibility targets (financial services, healthcare) are of particular concern.

Iranian-Aligned Groups' Enabled, Directed, or Inspired Violence in the U.S. Homeland

Public reporting has linked Iranian-sponsored groups to enabled or directed plots against a variety of Americans. For instance, in 2020, two men were convicted of conducting surveillance in the U.S. on behalf of Iran, with the knowledge that the information would be used by Iran-aligned threat actors to plan attacks on U.S. citizens and residents who had denounced the Iranian regime. Following the death of Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, Qods Force (IRGC-QF) commander Qasem Soleimani, a member of the IRGC was charged for a 2021 plot to assassinate U.S. National Security Advisor, John Bolton. The defendant attempted to pay a U.S. asset to conduct surveillance on Bolton and provide video evidence of his assassination once completed. In 2023, a New Jersey man was sentenced to 12 years in prison for receiving military-type training from Hezbollah, including how to construct, detonate, and utilize explosive devices in attacks. More recently in January 2026, a Brooklyn man was sentenced to 15 years for participating in a murder-for-hire plot on a U.S. journalist and human rights activist in New York who had been critical of the Iranian regime.

While there remains the potential for attacks directed by Iran-aligned FTOs against the U.S. homeland, the more immediate threat is likely to be attacks inspired by the conflict with Iran by homegrown violent extremists (HVE). Attacks in the U.S. related to terror networks like the Axis of Resistance are often by aggrieved individuals inspired by one or more calls to action by violent groups and notable conflicts.^{xv} There have been at least 17 plots in the U.S. homeland related to Iran and its terrorist proxy groups in the past five years.^{xvi} For instance, in 2025, a California man was sentenced to 19 years in prison for committing a series of arson attacks and fire bombings at universities and federal buildings in California. The defendant stated that the attacks were inspired

by Hamas's October 7 attack on Israel. More recently, a shooting at a bar in Austin, TX that occurred approximately 26 hours after the strikes between Iran, Israel, and the U.S. on February 28 is being investigated as a potential terror plot inspired by the conflict with Iran.^{xvii} Following the shooting, the Governor of Texas ordered the Texas National Guard and other security forces to increase surveillance, patrols, and security at key infrastructure sites in the energy sector and ports—critical infrastructure sectors commonly targeted by Iran-aligned FTOs abroad. These sectors were similarly targeted in the cyberattacks from Iran-aligned threat actors following the October 7, 2023, Hamas attack in Israel, among other critical infrastructure in the U.S.

Additional Resources

1. [The Mapping Militants Project](#) (NCITE Consortium Members Martha Crenshaw and Kaitlyn Robinson, Rice University)
2. [The Logic in Terrorist Use of Unmanned Aerial Systems, Enabling Factors, and Barriers to Exploitation](#) (NCITE)
3. [Tehran's Homeland Option: Terror Pathways for Iran to Strike in the United States](#) (Matthew Levitt, *CTC Sentinel*)
4. [Iran: Analysis, Research, and Events](#) (Center for Strategic and International Studies)
5. [Iranian External Operations, 1979 – Present](#) (Washington Institute)

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