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A RENEWED IRANIAN CYBERTHREAT

Late last month, the FBI issued a warning regarding possible Iranian cyber attacks on U.S. businesses and networks in response to the Trump administration's decision to withdraw from the Iran nuclear deal. On May 22nd, the FBI issued a statement declaring that: "Foreign cyber actors in the Islamic Republic of Iran could potentially use a range of computer network operations – from scanning networks for potential vulnerabilities to data deletion attacks – against US based networks." The FBI report also contained a chart outlining a variety of methods used by Iranian hackers in cyber attacks, including "spear-phishing" and "password spray" attacks, which allow hackers to silently gain access to networks. Previous Iranian cyber attacks have occurred as retaliatory efforts for "perceived slights against the regime" - something which, the FBI notes, could now include the U.S. withdrawal from the Iran deal as "justification for stepped up cyber attacks."

The warning is well-founded, because the threat posed by Iran in cyberspace is growing in both sophistication and menace. "Throughout 2017, [we] observed a significant increase in the number of cyber attacks originating from threat actors sponsored by Iran," noted cybersecurity firm Mandiant in its latest study of global cyber threats. "While they have captured notoriety over the past year, especially for their destructive attacks, much of their espionage activity has gone unnoticed. Their list of victims currently spans nearly every industry sector and extends well beyond regional conflicts in the Middle East." The results are pronounced; "Since 2010... Iran has increased its cyber espionage capabilities and is now operating at a pace and scale consistent with other nation-state sponsored APT [Advanced Persistent Threat] groups." (*Washington Free Beacon*, May 24, 2018; FireEye, April 2018)

DEFIANT KHAMENEI DOUBLES DOWN ON "RESISTANCE"

Amid mounting U.S. and international pressure, Iran's Supreme Leader, Ali Khamenei, is striking a defiant stand over his regime's regional influence. In a recent televised speech directed in part to Arab audiences, Khamenei extolled Arab youth "to take action and the initiative to control your own future," and pledged that the Islamic Republic "will continue to back oppressed nations and resistance forces in the region." "We will continue our support to oppressed nations," Khamenei said - a significant policy stance, given mounting U.S. efforts to reimpose sanctions on the Iranian regime, and an accelerating pullout of foreign banks and companies from business with Iran as a result. (Reuters, June 4, 2018)

MAPPING IRAN'S SYRIAN FOOTPRINT

Just how deep is Iran's influence in Syria? After a half-decade of overt and covert Iranian support to the regime of Bashar al-Assad, Tehran is widely understood to be playing a key role in the Syrian theater. But, as a new study from the Istanbul-based Omran Center for Strategic Study outlines, Iran's support is far broader than commonly understood, and encompasses not only direct military assistance but also an extensive web of economic and political contacts designed to give the Iranian regime a lasting presence on the territory of its top regional ally.

"Iranian influence in Syria is often reduced to its military support, including more than 50,000 armed militia members," the study notes. However, "Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and its auxiliary institutions not only provided military and financial support to the Syrian regime but have expanded their administrative and economic activities in Syria by infusing their institutions within the Armed Forces, service-delivery ministries, local political and armed bodies, and non-governmental organizations."

The results, as detailed by the report, are dramatic. By the end of last year, Iran's efforts encompassed - *inter alia* - large-scale recruitment of Shi'a fighters; the deployment of these forces, and those affiliated with Lebanon's Hezbollah militia, into the Syrian theater; the creation of a new military base south of Damascus, near the Golan Heights and Israeli territory; a raft of new economic agreements making Tehran a key player in Syrian reconstruction; the establishment of a branch of Iran's Islamic Azad University in Aleppo; and even the construction of a tripartite electric power scheme linking the economies and infrastructure of Iran, Iraq, and Syria. (Omran Center for Strategic Studies, May 2018)