

# The wider threat posed by Iran's militias in Syria and Lebanon





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*Dr. Azeem Ibrahim OBE is a Director at the Center for Global Policy and author of "The Rohingyas: Inside Myanmar's Genocide" (Hurst, 2017). Twitter: @AzeemIbrahim*

## INTRODUCTION

**I**ranian-backed militias dominate in both Lebanon and Syria, and have established political and military bases across both countries. In Lebanon, Hezbollah exists as a fortress of a political party that dominates parts of the country, paralyzes the political processes of a nation, murders its critics, and uses its territory as a base from which to conduct external operations in Syria and against Israel.

In Syria, Iranian militias continue to help prop up the regime of President Bashar Assad, as they have done for most of the 11 years the regime has been fighting its civil war. Their presence is the reason it has survived for as long as it has — but at the same time they reveal Assad's weakness.

As Iranian militias such as Hezbollah exerted more influence on the front lines of the Syrian conflict, they showed how relatively ineffectual is the regime's Syrian Arab Army. It could not hold or capture territory during offensives and so militias had to be formed, marshaled and brought in first as supplemental manpower and later as shock troops.

As they took over entire districts and areas of Syria, and ran them as they pleased, the



Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) taking part in five-days military exercises in three provinces. AFP

same militias revealed the truth that, in much of the country, the regime's laws and governance are only mere words written in distant chambers by men whose power on the ground is limited.

In both Lebanon and Syria, the influence of the militias is malign. They are agents of violence.

In Lebanon they are hostile to the democratic process, free speech and free politics. In Syria, the militias are part of a patchwork of warlords who operate like brigands, corruptly administering local areas, fighting for status and territory, and never allowing the local population — who are repressed under threat of violent death — a fair say in who rules them and how they ought to be governed.



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Hezbollah militia members posing with Hezbollah flags as they listen to the speech of Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah. AFP

## THE MILITIA PATCHWORK STRATEGY

The militias did not spring up by accident. They are an essential part of Iran's regional strategy, which for decades has included the seeding of militia groups that are in ideological agreement with the tenets of the 1979 Islamic Revolution.

In more recent years, this strategy has developed a new angle that positions these militia groups as part of a so-called "axis of resistance," a grouping with an explicit region-wide focus on combating the US and Israel and their allies in every country where this might be possible.

Funded and led on the battlefield by Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, and its expeditionary Quds Force, militias from Syria and Lebanon have played an active part in the Syrian civil war for the past 11 years. They have been at the regime's side on every battlefield and every front line. Many of the units seemingly recruited in Syria and staffed by Syrians operate far from where they were raised ostensibly as local defense forces.

It is vital to understand the militias. Their influence on the region is significant. They are the linchpin of the Assad regime's wartime coalition and constitute the de facto leadership in many areas nominally ruled by the president from Damascus.

Hezbollah, meanwhile, is the essential force in Lebanese politics and government. Part army, part political party, it has been integral to the fate and degeneration of Lebanon over the past 15 years.

To fully understand the crises in Syria and Lebanon, one must see the militias as part of a single, connected and articulated Iranian regional project. This is something some Western analysts have for years been unwilling to do but it is essential that they now do. As Iran's regional project takes shape, it is more important than ever to properly understand it.

Iran's regional strategy affects every country in the Middle East, and every country hoping for a stable region in which to conduct business, fight terrorism or promote international development.

As events in Lebanon and Syria show, the greater the power of the militias, the greater the regional chaos.

## HEZBOLLAH

Hezbollah is the primary Iranian proxy in Lebanon and has been for 40 years. It is both an army and a political party. This is true domestically and, increasingly, abroad. With its soldiers dispatched to wage large-scale war in Syria, and involvement in violence and street-level activity at home, the name of the





Syrian government forces gesture as they walk down a destroyed street in the Palestinian camp of Yarmuk in 2018. AFP

party — which declares it to be the “Army of God” — is apt.

Hezbollah dominates political life in Lebanon entirely, even if it does not, and cannot, win a majority in the country’s elections. Instead, Hezbollah outmuscles its opposition by being more militant, more willing to embrace violence, and better organized, all at the direction of the regime in Iran.

Violence underscores the veto inherent in the system. Hezbollah is part of an unproductive legislature and has the ultimate say because, unlike its opposition, it has power that its followers can exercise violently on the streets.

It is important to understand the nature of Hezbollah’s violence. The party’s military wing has killed many within Lebanon, sometimes in open fighting, sometimes through a campaign of simple political murder. Much of this is shrouded in conventions that prompt silence; for example, the idea that even if every disinterested observer believes Hezbollah is responsible for the death of a politician or commentator or journalist, it is impolite or unreasonable to say so.

This is why it took so many years, and so many claims of insufficient evidence, to convict three men affiliated with Hezbollah of the 2005 murder of former Prime Minister Rafik Hariri<sup>1</sup>. It is why, when journalist Lokman Slim was murdered in February 2021, he was referred to by the international press not as a victim of Hezbollah’s violence but, rather, as a “critic” of the movement<sup>2</sup>. When the politician Mohammed Chatah, a former Lebanese finance minister, was killed by a bomb in 2013, the international media euphemistically called him a “Hezbollah foe<sup>3</sup>.”

Naturally, this violence intimidates the opposition. It often causes journalists and politicians targeted by Hezbollah either to restrict their activities or leave Lebanon.

### HEZBOLLAH’S ASSASSINS’ VETO

This culture of silence is sufficient; everyone in Lebanon knows, for example, that no one will be arrested, tried or convicted for the murder of Slim. Even though everyone knows not only who did it but also the message they intended to send by killing him, nothing will be done.

Slim lived for many years in a part of the country known as a “Hezbollah stronghold.” He believed he was safe, even as Hezbollah-aligned media called him a traitor and a foreign agent. His murder was intended to prove that no critics of Hezbollah are safe.

By killing people like him, and successfully evading any consequences, Hezbollah silences the press and muzzles the politicians in Lebanon. It holds the country hostage to its own capacity for violence.

Lebanon cannot be governed well in the

absence of a free media and the rule of law. As it is, political murder, and the threat of political murder, remains a tool that Hezbollah is happy to use to keep the country compliant and dysfunctional.

### POLITICAL LOG-JAM

Hezbollah’s presence in the Lebanese parliament also paralyzes the country’s government. This is not exclusively Hezbollah’s doing; the parliament and the system for allocating political offices in Lebanon leads to frequent partisan gridlock.

The parliament is strictly regimented by creed and by region, with governments frequently formed by coalition members who cannot agree and so cannot pass laws. This situation is not conducive to stability or an easing of intercommunal tensions. Instead, the system has ossified and corrupted, leading to the breakdown of basic governance.

The effects of this can be seen in the persistent sanitation problems in the capital, Beirut, and in the current capital controls and bank heists across Lebanon.

Most notably, it led to the devastating explosion at Beirut’s port in August 2020, which was the result of decades of mismanagement and poor planning. The response to the catastrophe has been characterized by further executive malfunction.

Hezbollah participates in the fracturing of Lebanese politics because it has no interest in the political system in the country functioning properly or running smoothly. Despite many academics wrongly insisting that Hezbollah is primarily a social movement, it is in fact an organization whose social functions cater to one creed within a balkanized country. There is no incentive, in Hezbollah’s eyes, for ensuring that people who are not Shiites are able to live peaceful and prosperous lives.

But Hezbollah has another mission, which is to further the aims of the Iranian regional project. This means participating in conflicts and wars against states that oppose the Islamic Revolution, including Israel, Saudi Arabia, the US and all of their allies. As part of the “axis of resistance,” Hezbollah has sent thousands of its fighters to Syria to prop up the Assad regime.

The “axis of resistance” idea is so deeply embedded in Hezbollah’s DNA that it has been at the forefront of another Iranian regional policy as it has developed drones to harass Israel on land and at sea<sup>4</sup>. This is part of another Iranian plan for the region: To use drones and ballistic missiles to torment its opponents in nearby countries.

Hezbollah’s front-line participation in this program, and its propaganda, are the actions not of a political party within a balkanized political system but of a fighting force compelled by circumstance to make a pantomime of politics.



Hassan Nasrallah has served as Hezbollah's political and religious leader for 30 years. Throughout this time, he has called for open war with Israel and Israel's allies. In recent years, the international news media has speculated that Nasrallah might not truly believe this to be in Hezbollah's best interest. Haaretz, a liberal Israeli newspaper, suggested that Nasrallah might secretly fear war, even as his rhetoric raises the stakes<sup>5</sup>.

On a purely practical level, this might be true. Israel is better armed than Hezbollah. If the two were to clash in open, conventional combat, Hezbollah would likely lose. But as a militia, part of a patchwork of Iranian-commanded organizations across the region, Hezbollah is determined to participate in Iran's regional conflict, whether it involves the use of drones, soldiers fighting in Syria, or acts of terrorism.

It is necessary, therefore, to examine the Iranian regional project of which Hezbollah is a part, and in the name of which the party threatens war and actively participates in it.

## IRAN'S REGIONAL PROJECT

The Iranian regional project requires that its militias must constantly be perpetrating acts of low-level violence against the US and Israel and their regional friends and allies. This is the prism through which: Hezbollah was established in 1982 and built up in Lebanon, under Tehran's supervision, as an explicitly pro-Iran grouping of previously disparate militant Shiite political factions; its military wing is structured; and its people and expertise are put to use by the IRGC leadership.

The effects of this regional policy are clear and can be seen throughout the Middle East. Hezbollah trainers and bomb-makers have been used in conflicts in Iraq, Syria and Yemen, and its forces have fought in these wars as part of a coalition of Iranian militias fighting under the "axis of resistance" label.

As the researcher Matthew Levitt documents in a paper published by the Middle East Institute, Hezbollah forces accounted for a significant section of the foreign contingent that was overseen by the former commander of the IRGC-Quds Force, Qassem Soleimani, until his death in 2020.

As if to illustrate the subordination of Hezbollah within Iran's militias project, Levitt notes that "Gen. Qassem Soleimani personally assumed more of a command leadership position over Hezbollah's fighting forces, at times at the expense of the group's own commanders<sup>6</sup>."

Hezbollah has also provided fighters and expertise to forces in the Syrian war and elsewhere. According to Levitt, the US Treasury estimated that in 2013 Hezbollah affiliates ran networks "beyond Lebanon's borders in places like Cyprus, Egypt, Iraq,

Jordan, Turkey, Syria and Yemen."

It is likely that these regional ties have only deepened since then, as Iran's regional strategy has coalesced in Syria to protect Assad, and in Yemen to protect and arm the Houthis.

After Soleimani was killed in a US drone strike, Hezbollah commanders who previously served under him stepped into leadership roles of their own.

## THE MILITIA CAVALCADE

Hezbollah is not merely one among many militias in Iran's orbit, even if it is a senior partner, of sorts following its service on the battlefields of Syria. Hezbollah is the model for all of these militias. IRGC generals actively boast about their creation of Hezbollah-like organizations, established along the same lines and using the same basic tactics to supplement what in Iranian doctrine is called its "fighters without borders."

Mazaher Majidi, an IRGC general, said: "There was a time when we used to boast that we had Hezbollah of Lebanon in the region. Today, we have dozens of cohesive forces that are ready to carry out military operations and are acting like Hezbollah: in Syria, in Iraq, in Yemen, in Afghanistan and even in Pakistan<sup>7</sup>."

This is, as he says, a boast. Nonetheless, any objective analysis would show it also to be true.

## 'HEZBOLLAHIZATION'

We might call this strategy "Hezbollahization." It is the idea of creating new militias, based on the model provided by Hezbollah, designed to fight in specific conflicts across the region and fuel internal sectarian battles within societies.

This is not only a broad regional strategy adopted by the Iranian regime, and its IRGC, from the beginning. It is also a necessary concept to understand and, furthermore, one that is vital when discussing the Syrian civil war and the nature of actions by Iranian militias during that conflict.

The Hezbollah model combines the threat of violence directed toward domestic opponents with a willingness to fight external enemies, including participation in foreign wars in other countries. This is essential to "axis of resistance" thinking, which stresses the provision of men to fight in external conflicts and the centrality of the foreign fighter in domestic Iranian and IRGC thinking.

With enough militias founded on the Hezbollah model, Iran believes it can not only dominate and paralyze the governance of countries across the region but it can also have, under IRGC command, a steady supply of fighting men from across the region — a diverse diaspora of willing fighters and volunteers ready to take part in new conflicts, support preexisting assets in others, and generally mobilize sufficient militias and men to make the Middle East region an armed camp that is

A boy waves a Hezbollah flag during a rally to attend a speech by leader Hassan Nasrallah in the southern Lebanese city of Nabatiyeh. AFP



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hostile toward Israel, the US and Saudi Arabia.

In Syria, where Iranian militias have proved essential in keeping the Assad regime in power, this policy of militia proliferation has proven effective. Hezbollah has fought hard battles in the regime's stead, ultimately under IRGC supervision and command.

Militias have similarly proved to be vital in the defense of the regime's president and have taken roles in the practical running of sections of the country under militia (meaning Iranian-aligned) direction.

## MILITIA VIOLENCE

Hezbollah has been the most significant Iranian militia active in the Syrian civil war. It has sent tens of thousands of fighters to the country and they have been pushed into some of the regime's hardest campaigns and battles. Initially, Hezbollah fighters were concentrated near the border between Lebanon and Syria, and the party's propaganda focused on claims they were there to defend Shiite civilians and holy shrines<sup>8</sup>.

Notably, Hezbollah forces have been involved in atrocities. They mounted the siege of Madaya beginning in 2015, which was especially brutal and led to starvation among the population of the town and the fighters defending it<sup>9</sup>.

As time passed, the scope of Hezbollah's mission grew. Along with other Iranian-led militias, it was prompted to take up more significant battlefield positions, including as shock troops for offensives around Aleppo and near Idlib in the country's north.

Hezbollah forces were broadly considered more effective than the Syrian Army and the army's own paramilitaries. Due to manpower shortages among the Alawite minority from which many Syrian soldiers are drawn, foreign reinforcements had to be found. In the militias — which recruited widely, from as far afield as Pakistan and Afghanistan — the regime found a solution. But this did not guarantee victory.

By 2020, the regime coalition that included Hezbollah had conquered the rebellion in the Syrian south. It had deployed Hezbollah and other militia forces across the country, including during offensives in Aleppo and Deir Ezzor.

But this was to be the final attack on Syrian rebel forces in the country's north; in Idlib province, where 3 million people awaited the assault and to which more than a million refugees and rebel fighters had been transported as the regime locked up the rest of the country.

Hezbollah fighters and militia forces were at the forefront of this advance. But they were halted, unexpectedly, by a Turkish intervention that attacked the columns of the advancing Syrian army and militia fighters, killing many and ultimately driving the rest away.

Many Hezbollah fighters were among those



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killed in the failed March 2020 attack, which likely marked the high-water mark for the regime's military advances, spearheaded as they were by militia fighters.

The bodies of Hezbollah fighters were returned, with ceremony, to Lebanon<sup>10</sup>. Iran's militias in Syria thereafter focused on running and entrenching themselves in those areas of the country in which they were already established.

## MILITIA ENTRENCHMENT

Many individual Iranian-run militias have fought in the war in Syria. In 2013, the Syrian regime promulgated Legislative Decree 55, which formalized and encouraged a proliferation of decentralized militia forces under the umbrella of the regime's war effort. Many militias are of external origin, funded by and made up largely of foreigners<sup>11</sup>.

Iranian-led militias include many from Iraq, including Kataib Hezbollah, Faylaq Waad Al-Sadiq and Liwa Al-Hamad. They are largely staffed by Iraqis, paid for by cash from Iraq and Iran, and take direction from Iraqi officers under the supervision of the IRGC.

Some gray areas exist. Many of the militias organized under the Assad regime's umbrella terms — notably the National Defense Forces and Local Defense Forces — include militia groups funded and commanded by more than one source. Each has elements that are endowed both by Iran and Russia, the latter of which is another significant source of funding, command and impetus for the militia forces in Syria.

Others still are the creations of local warlords and businessmen who hire fighters, pay their salaries, and take care of procurement themselves.

Many of these businessmen are linked to broader and more nebulous Iranian regional efforts to recruit local assistance for its regional project. Their militias are not explicitly Iranian-supported or funded but they nonetheless take their place as part of Iran's regional policy.

One example is Mohammed Al-Saeed, a businessman of Palestinian origin. His Al-Quds brigade was enlarged and expanded because of its close relationship to Iran (and, to a lesser extent, its links with Russia), growing to 300 fighters in 2015. Al-Saeed became a force within the Aleppo region, a player within its informal governance on the regime side while at the same time serving Iran's regional interests<sup>12</sup>.

Even if they are not directly affiliated with Iranian-sponsored and IRGC-led militia groups, these militias organized by businessmen have a connection to the broader thrust of Tehran's regional project that is of note and worthy of discussion.

The militias supplement, support and have sometimes fought against each other and the Syrian Army. The Syrian Army itself received training, materials and direction from Iranian

sources, including IRGC officers.

The army is not a militia and so is not the subject of this report. But it is worth noting that, in practice, specific divisions of the Syrian army do act like militias — notably the infamous 4th Division, which shields businessmen and traders who pay protection money, in the same way a warlord's militia would do. Many of them receive direction from, and owe comparable loyalty to, Iranian regional commanders,

Iranian militias are primarily concentrated around the Israeli and Lebanese border areas in the south of the country, and in Bukamal, Mayadin and Dier Ezzor city in the east. In these areas, militias rule in the manner of warlords or bands of brigands. Iran and Russia were able to use the loose National Defense Forces framework to increase their sway across the country — in Iran's case, around Aleppo<sup>13</sup>.

## MILITIA RULE

Across the nation, key cities, rural supply hubs, and settlements near provincial and national borders have become areas dominated by militias. In some cases of infighting, militias contest control of these essential areas.

The state is not present in force in these areas. Damascus has little hold over the Iranian-sponsored militias operating at the Lebanese border. In rural Deir Ezzor, the same holds true. One Iranian-sponsored militia competes with Russian-sponsored militias, the Iranian-backed National Defense Forces, and even openly operating IRGC personnel, to harass locals for cash and to show force<sup>14</sup>.

A local resident called Zuhair told Elizabeth Tsurkov of the New Lines Institute that “multiple militias and mafias are ruling the area and each has its own agenda.” This is a fine analogy for the patchwork nature of militia-ruled areas across Syria.

Zuhair name-checked several groups that operate checkpoints along roads in the countryside at which they demand “taxes.”

He said: “Just the road from Muhassan to Abu Kamal is full of checkpoints. The 4th Division, the security office of Liwaa' Al-Quds (a Russian-backed Palestinian militia), the NDF and the IRGC all have checkpoints on the road.

“Any shop owner, like a pharmacist, who wants to purchase goods has to pass through these checkpoints and pay at each one. This has led people to close their shops and leave the (regime-held) areas.”

The way that specifically Iranian-led militias govern much of Syria is criminal. They are involved, for example, in smuggling contraband across borders, into Lebanon, Iraq and Jordan<sup>15</sup>.

On the face of it, such criminal activity has little to do with broader Iranian revolutionary interests. But it affects the lives of locals significantly — especially during the current time of high food and energy prices — and



Lokman Slim, a prominent Lebanese activist who was found dead in his car in south Lebanon in 2021. AFP

therefore stands in the way of reconstruction and Syria returning to a state of government from the center.

As such, it is reasonable to speculate about the reasons why Iran, and to a lesser extent Russia, weaken Damascus by keeping these militias operational. In both cases, the foreign powers do not care about a stable or well-served Syria. The weakness of the regime is not a problem for them. In Iran's case, this is because Tehran is satisfied with the parallel network of militias it has created and which serve its broader regional interests.

As Syria degenerates in terms of governance and its economy, the militia presence serves two purposes: To profit from the chaos through the organization of criminal activities acceptable to the IRGC leadership and the shake-down of locals; and separately to simultaneously advance broader and more direct Iranian regional interests.

The culmination of these efforts is what Phillip Smyth of the Washington Institute for Near East Policy described as an Iranian attempt to supplement the involvement of Lebanese Hezbollah in Syria with the creation of something new, something promised during a decade of speeches by IRGC officials and Iranian regional strategists — new organization based on the Hezbollah model. This time, it would be Syrian in origin.

## A SYRIAN HEZBOLLAH

For almost a decade, there have been claims, and rumors, of a Syrian version of Hezbollah formed by the IRGC along the same lines as the Lebanese version.

Smyth has charted the history of this



situation<sup>16</sup>. Beginning with regime-affiliated militias that were designed and created by Iran in 2012 and 2013, starting in late 2012 other Iranian proxies from Lebanon and Iraq began to mold existing combatants on the regime side — who shared the Iranian clerical regime's belief in Twelver Shiism — into what were, to all intents and purposes, copies of Hezbollah.

Within a year, these armed groups began to adopt the characteristics of Hezbollah on the battlefield. They were trained in Hezbollah-style fighting, and spread geographically around the country: in the Syrian south, in Damascus Governorate, and in Latakia, Homs and Aleppo provinces.

As Smyth notes, the name Hezbollah and the concept of Hezbollahization are not impositions; instead they reflect the open reality and public statements made by these groups and their commanders.

“Beginning in 2014,” he writes, “various Syrian Shiite militias began to call themselves Hezbollah fi Suriya (Hezbollah in Syria)<sup>17</sup>.”

The groups that used this title were quickly deployed in the thick of the fighting, used in a similar way to how Lebanese Hezbollah has been used throughout the war. They fought across the country in tandem with regime forces and under the command of Lebanese Hezbollah detachments. Smyth draws attention in particular to Busra Al-Sham, where Lebanese Hezbollah organized local Shiite fighters on their principles of religion and combat.

Syrian Hezbollah is not a one-size-fits-all organization or even, in practice, an umbrella group like the National Defense Forces. Instead, the model is similar to that employed by Iran within Iraq: Numerous cut-outs are created, sharing some leadership personnel and access to equipment and training, and they carry out varying missions and operate in different geographic regions.

These organizations are operationally loyal and responsive to IRGC direction and work to support Iranian geopolitical projects, but they are also directly tied, through vows of religious loyalty and devotion, to the supreme leader of Iran. It is this connection that most resembles the allegiance of Hezbollah to the Iranian leadership and provides the basis for Iraqi, and now Syrian, Hezbollahization.

When fighters in these units are killed in Iraq or Syria, Smyth notes, Hezbollah flags are present on documents and propaganda commemorating the “martyrs.” The flags are displayed next to photos of Lebanese Hezbollah's leader, Hassan Nasrallah, and sometimes alongside emblems or photographs of the Assad regime, on whose side the Syrian Hezbollah combatants are nominally meant to be fighting.

This is the product of integration; the Syrian Hezbollah fighters are strongly associated with

  
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Lebanese Hezbollah because their religion is the same, they are trained the same way, and they share tactics, operational characteristics and ultimate allegiance to the Iranian supreme leader, channeled through his Revolutionary Guards.

But more than this, Syrian Hezbollah is an outpost of Iranian regional domination. Lebanese Hezbollah is aligned against Israel and has fought the Americans and British in Iraq, and the Arab coalition in Yemen.

Syrian Hezbollah will have the same enemies and the same objectives. And if it is allowed to consolidate, as Assad survives, it will have the same regional effects and the same targets.

### THE REGIONAL EFFECT

In Syria and Lebanon, the proliferation of Hezbollah-like militias has already had a significant effect. These groups have fought on the side of the Assad regime in Syria, assisting in the broad defeat of the regime's enemies in the south, center and west of the country. Syria is now a patchwork of Iranian and Russian militias orbiting a failing central government, just as Lebanon is a patchwork of sectarian militias orbiting a failed parliament and government.

In both cases, the Shiite militias both create and feed off of political chaos, and spread political violence. They are as prepared to kill on the streets as they are on the battlefield. Their objectives are the furtherance of Iranian regional domination and power projection, and the defeat of Iran's enemies (most notably the US, Israel and Saudi Arabia, and their local allies) but also their own entrenchment and survival and control of their own turf.

The regional effects of this Hezbollahization are already profound and will become more obvious and undeniable. Not only has it provided a steady supply of troops for conflicts fought by Iranian proxy forces across the region, it has also affected international missions, including the coalition's efforts to stabilize the situation in Yemen and the campaign against Daesh.

Local allies of the US and other forces are targeted by the Shiite militias. Normally, Washington and other powers can potentially arrive in force to prevent their allies from being overrun, as the US has done numerous times to protect its Kurdish Syrian Democratic Forces allies from Iranian and Russian-led militias. But this is not inevitable.

Similarly, Lebanese Hezbollah's increasing focus on the use of drones and ballistic missiles is key to Iran's regional strategy. These weapons already pose a profound threat to Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Israel. Led by Hezbollah ballistics experts, and tested by Hezbollah fighters, these missiles and drones could set the tenor of future war



not only in the Middle East but also, as recent weeks have shown, potentially as far afield as Ukraine.

### CONCLUSION

The development and entrenchment of Iranian-sponsored militias in Lebanon and Syria is not new. It is part of a regional strategy dating back almost as far the Islamic Revolution of 1979, and comes from the heart of that revolution and its revisionist, expansionist vision of the Middle East and the world.

Although American and European leaders frequently decry the broken nature of Syria amid its frozen civil war, and the dysfunction of Lebanon's politics, the overt causes and consequences — namely, increased militia activity — are less understood.

But make no mistake, militias act in violence and have violent ends in mind. To continue to

Members of Hezbollah in Lebanon holding the Hezbollah flag. AFP

allow them to operate as they do, in Lebanon and now in Syria, invites more violence of an unforeseeable extent and savagery.

Initially, those who will be worst affected are the locals the militias in Syria can shake down for protection money, followed by Lebanese intellectuals and politicians.

But this sort of violence does not end there. If unaddressed, as it has been until now, both Lebanon and Syria could become a hotbed for region-spanning violence, delivered by drones, missiles, suicide bombs or brigades of fighting men.

It is time for the wider world to understand this challenge and begin to think, long, hard and realistically, about how best to prevent its most pernicious and potentially long-lasting effects. The policy of Iran's regional domination, and those fearful of Iranian domination, must change to reflect this reality.

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