

Countering Threats from Iran's Proxies and Partners During Wartime

by [Hanin Ghaddar \(/experts/hanin-ghaddar\)](#), [April Longley Alley \(/experts/april-longley-alley\)](#), [Michael Knights \(/experts/michael-knights\)](#)

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Hanin Ghaddar \(/experts/hanin-ghaddar\)](#)

Hanin Ghaddar is the Friedmann Senior Fellow at The Washington Institute's Rubin Family Arab Politics Program, where she focuses on Shia politics throughout the Levant.



[April Longley Alley \(/experts/april-longley-alley\)](#)

Dr. April Longley Alley is a Senior Fellow at The Washington Institute, where her research focuses on Yemen and the Gulf.



[Michael Knights \(/experts/michael-knights\)](#)

Michael Knights is an Adjunct Fellow at The Washington Institute and cofounder of the Militia Spotlight platform, which offers in-depth analysis of developments related to Iran-backed militias.



Brief Analysis

Three experts discuss how Hezbollah, the Yemeni Houthis, and pro-Iran militias in Iraq have reacted to the war so far, outlining steps Washington and its regional partners can take to keep them from escalating further.

On March 12, The Washington Institute held a virtual Policy Forum with Hanin Ghaddar, April Longley Alley, and Michael Knights. Ghaddar is the Friedmann Senior Fellow in the Institute's Rubin Program on Arab Politics. Alley is a senior fellow at the Institute and former senior political advisor to the UN's Yemen envoy. Knights is an adjunct fellow with the Institute, cofounder of its [Militia Spotlight platform](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/series/militia-spotlight) (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/series/militia-spotlight>), and chief product officer for Horizon Engage. The following is a rapporteurs' summary of their remarks.

Hanin Ghaddar

Hezbollah's entrance into the Iran war is inexplicable when viewed from a Lebanese perspective, but entirely rational when one recalls that the militia is essentially a subordinate member of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps-Qods Force. Hezbollah was created for this moment—Tehran established the group more than four decades ago to defend the Iranian regime in moments of crisis. Its latest attacks on Israel were guaranteed from the moment the regime faced an existential threat—in this case the death of Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei. Hezbollah's theory of victory mirrors Tehran's strategy: they seek not to win the war but to survive it.

As such, the previously thin line between the IRGC and Hezbollah leadership has vanished. Iranian officers inside Lebanon are commanding the group's military operations and making decisions on its behalf. Internal debate within Hezbollah does not really matter; most of its orders come from its Iranian patrons. Currently, these orders are to create a second front and thereby distract and divide Israeli forces.

Hezbollah has had sixteen months to rebuild after Israel's massive attacks on the group in 2024. Although Israel continued killing Hezbollah commanders and operatives after their November 2024 ceasefire agreement, the group refrained from retaliation so that it could focus on preserving and restoring its military capabilities, anticipating a moment like this one. It retained substantial manufacturing capabilities and continued smuggling drone and missile components through Syria and Lebanon's Mediterranean ports, taking advantage of its penetration into customs and port authority offices. This smuggling activity was largely unaffected by Israeli strikes or the Lebanese Armed Forces mission to disarm Hezbollah. Israel militarily degraded the group, but no one addressed its deep infiltration of Lebanon's financial and political institutions. Unless that foundation is dismantled, Hezbollah will always be able to reconstitute its forces and resume attacks regardless of any military degradation Israel can inflict.

For its part, the Lebanese government has been reactive and ineffective. Officials formally banned Hezbollah military activities when the Iran war broke out but failed to address the group's representation in the government (including two cabinet ministers) or its participation in political decisionmaking. Moreover, Beirut has not clarified how it intends to implement its prohibition on Hezbollah weapons, since military courts are lenient on the group's operatives and the LAF refuses to confront it. Army leaders say they fear a civil war, but they have failed to acknowledge that an escalating regional conflict or an all-out war with Israel would inflict even greater damage on Lebanon than any LAF-Hezbollah clash could.

Meanwhile, Hezbollah is giving clear signs that it fears confrontation with the LAF, such as publishing a memo falsely claiming that Shia soldiers in the army would defect before fighting the group. Although Shia have long been Hezbollah's core constituency, the vast majority of Shia soldiers are quite loyal to the LAF as an institution and would not defect.

More broadly, Lebanon's entire Shia community is facing another serious reckoning. The first reckoning came when Iran refused to retaliate for Israel's massive 2024 military campaign (which included the assassination of Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah) or provide reconstruction funding after the fighting. A second reckoning is happening now, as Hezbollah drags Lebanon into an unwanted war on Iran's behalf with no consideration for the Shia community's safety.

April Longley Alley

Yemen's Houthi movement is likely undergoing an internal debate between more radical and more pragmatic factions over whether to enter the Iran war and, if so, when and how. The decision is in some ways less straightforward than their previous Red Sea campaign, which was popular in north Yemen because it was framed as "defending Palestine" and posed less risk to their relations with Saudi Arabia.

Houthi hardliners see defiance of the United States and Israel as a duty and likely want to oppose what they view as a hegemonic U.S.-Israeli project in the region—particularly if they assess that their Iranian partner is under serious threat, or simply to restore some deterrence. Yet there are also strong incentives for restraint, and significant risks to military involvement. The Houthis have faced U.S. and Israel strikes before and know that a new round would be painful. More important are their domestic calculations. They know that Yemen's internationally recognized government, though fragmented and weak, could attempt to exploit any Houthi weakness. At the same time, they have maintained open lines of communication with Saudi Arabia and seek a deal to end the Yemen war. Entering the Iran war at a time when Tehran is attacking Saudi Arabia could jeopardize those talks.

Although the Houthis value their partnership with Iran, their movement emerged independently through Yemen's internal political and military dynamics; they do not operate as an Iranian proxy. Hence, any decision to enter the war will be made in Yemen—not in Tehran—and will ultimately rest with the group's leader, Abdul-Malik al-Houthi.

If they choose to fight, the Houthis will likely move up an escalatory ladder. They may start by targeting Israel and [disrupting shipping](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/menamaritime/) (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/menamaritime/>) in the Red Sea. As the conflict increasingly takes on an economic dimension, maritime disruptions would give them the greatest opportunity to exert pressure. Now that the Strait of Hormuz is effectively closed, attacks on Red Sea shipping would maximize the Houthis' impact on global energy markets and maritime trade. This pressure and leverage could intensify as Saudi Arabia increases its Red Sea energy exports via the East-West Pipeline to make up for the closed Hormuz route.

Because the Houthis receive financing, weaponry, and political support from Tehran, they have a vested interest in the regime's survival. Degradation of

the Iranian regime could weaken their own negotiating position and financial outlook. Yet the Houthis can survive without Tehran. Although they do not control Yemen's oil and gas revenues, they have proven highly adept at extracting revenue from the local population. They have also sought to increase their resilience and autonomy by diversifying their weapon supply chains—for example, they have procured dual-use components (particularly from China) and built regional smuggling routes and relationships in the Horn of Africa. Although the full extent of their military capabilities is unclear, the Houthis remain capable of harassing ships in the Red Sea and striking Israel while withstanding allied airstrikes.

Michael Knights

Iraq's government has not taken action against the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) during the war, despite terrorist elements within the militia umbrella organization launching Iranian-provided drones and missiles against U.S. forces in the region. In addition to targeting bases in Jordan, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, and Iraqi Kurdistan, pro-Iran Shia groups such as Kataib Hezbollah and Asaib Ahl al-Haq have attacked energy infrastructure in northern Iraq. Notably, they have not struck Israel during this round. During the height of the Gaza war, such militias attacked Israeli targets more than 150 times, but they largely ceased this activity in late 2024 after Israel threatened to target the PMF leadership.

Over the past two weeks, U.S. forces have responded to PMF attacks by targeting approximately sixteen militia elements. Yet the PMF's terrorist leaders have not been targeted, and their groups retain the ability to attack U.S. forces.

As in the past, the Iraqi government's inaction makes it complicit in such attacks. Despite paying PMF salaries, Baghdad has refrained from arresting, dismissing, or even publicly condemning key Iran-backed figures involved in these incidents. The government possesses robust signals intelligence and other counterterrorism capabilities, but it refuses to employ them against terrorist elements within the PMF. So long as Baghdad fails to act, Iran-backed groups will continue targeting U.S. forces in the region and fomenting instability inside Iraq.

The United States has drafted—but not yet employed—a comprehensive sanctions package targeting Iraqi oil and gas networks that facilitate both PMF terrorist activity and the Iranian regime's ability to evade other sanctions. Disrupting these illicit financial networks would help prevent Iran-backed groups from sustaining their attacks and other hostile activities.

More broadly, the Iran war has distracted Washington from its best opportunity since 2003 to turn Baghdad away from Tehran. In January, President Trump strongly condemned Nouri al-Maliki and threatened to withdraw all U.S. support if he was reappointed as Iraq's prime minister. Yet the administration changed its tone as the war drew close, eschewing stern warnings to Baghdad about the costs of backing Iran and its militia proxies. Washington must go back to pushing Iraqi leaders away from Tehran or the generational opportunity will be lost.

This summary was prepared by Sarah Boches, Kate Chesnutt, and Gabriel Wein. The Policy Forum series is made possible through the generosity of the Winkler Lowy Foundation. ❖

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