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Rolling Back Iran's Foreign Legion

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Brief Analysis

Two experts diagnose the Shia militia problem in Lebanon, Syria, and Iraq, offering concrete advice for reducing the power of Iran's proxies.

On February 2, Hanin Ghaddar and Phillip Smyth addressed a Policy Forum at The Washington Institute. Ghaddar, the Institute's Friedman Visiting Fellow, is a veteran Lebanese journalist and researcher. Smyth is a Soref Fellow at the Institute and a researcher at the University of Maryland. The event marked the release of Ghaddar's new Institute report "[Iran's Foreign Legion: The Impact of Shia Militias on U.S. Foreign Policy](#)." The following is a rapporteur's summary of their remarks.

HANIN GHADDAR

Political balance has ceased to exist in Lebanon. The March 14 coalition has faded away and could not compete with Hezbollah even if it were still in play. Hezbollah has more power than ever in Lebanon and serves as Iran's main arm in the rest of the region as well. What we are seeing in Syria is not separate Shia militias fighting on the Assad regime's behalf, but parts of a structured army commanded by Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps-Qods

Force, with Hezbollah as its right hand. Hezbollah was somewhat independent prior to 2011, but after senior officials Imad Mughniyah and Mustafa Badreddine were killed, Qods Force chief Qasem Soleimani was left in direct control of the group. The Afghan militia Liwa Fatemiyoun and the Pakistani militia Liwa Zainabiyoun are also part of this structure.

After gaining a greater hold on Hezbollah, Iran was able to increase its control over Lebanon's state institutions. Previously, the group was not part of the state, but the line between the two is very thin today, with Hezbollah and its proxies increasingly infiltrating the government and other institutions. In short, Hezbollah was once a state within the Lebanese state, but now Lebanon is a state within Hezbollah's state.

Tehran has also used Hezbollah and other militias to build a land bridge across portions of Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon. This corridor has three purposes: (1) providing cheap transport of weapons from Iran to the Mediterranean Sea; (2) establishing an alternate supply route in case Israel bombs airfields during the next war with Hezbollah or its allies; and (3) reaffirming militant Shia identity in the region.

On the third point, some Hezbollah fighters refer to the corridor as "Wilayat Imam Ali" (the state of Imam Ali) in honor of the sanctified Shia figure. The land bridge will make more strategic sense once Iran increases its influence over the governments that control these territories, bringing Shia politicians into its fold and establishing a unified sectarian presence.

In Lebanon, one can already find offices for various prominent Shia militias, along with around fifty television and radio channels that cater to Shia communities, all managed by militias. Domestic resistance to Hezbollah is disorganized and has relatively little support. Going against the party line used to be fine as long as no one was listening, but the group is now more likely to make an example out of individuals who criticize it. Meanwhile, Hezbollah and allies such as Amal are expected to win roughly 70 percent of the vote in the May general election with the help of a new electoral law. Despite its strength, the group needs to win at the ballot box because it cannot keep toppling the government by force.

In Iraq, Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani and other figures from the holy city of Najaf have prevented Iran from taking complete hold of the country's Shia community, so Tehran is controlling what it can while waiting for him to die and trying to empower his potential successor. After the next parliamentary elections in May, Iraq may well become more like Lebanon.

Syria is a different mission—there, Shia fighters and their families are being shipped into portions of the land bridge in a kind of colonizing effort. Fostering demographic changes in "useful" areas of Syria is part of Iran's strategy, though Sunni backlash to this practice seems inevitable in the long run. Iran will probably wind up butting heads with Russia as well, since Moscow's practice of working within Syria's state institutions is often at odds with Tehran's efforts in parallel institutions.

In military terms, Hezbollah is not what is used to be. Recruitment used to take years, but the group is now hiring most anyone, producing troops who are less disciplined, less focused on the ideology of "resistance," and more driven by Shia sectarian sentiment. In other cases, fighters from poverty-stricken families are joining not for ethical or religious reasons, but simply for paychecks. Combined with recent budgetary shifts, the glut of fighters is preventing Hezbollah from providing as many social services to the community; the group now tends to favor fighters and their families when disbursing assistance.

The United States can take several steps in response to these trends. In the short term, supporting anti-Iran and anti-Hezbollah candidates in the May elections could harden the line between the state and Hezbollah. In the longer term, Washington would be wise to draw redlines in Syria and stick to them. The only actor currently doing is Israel.

PHILLIP SMYTH

The United States needs to reassess Iran's network of militias. Despite objections from many in the foreign policy community, Shia militias in Syria and Iraq are undeniably connected. Apart from Hezbollah, Tehran actually prefers splinter groups over large, formal organizations. In 2013, for example, the Iraqi militia Harakat al-Nujaba split from Asaib Ahl al-Haq, but the groups still release similar public relations material, follow the same Iranian ideology, and fight the same battles. Iranian-supported groups might have different names, but they are paid from the same funds—Tehran itself often calls on fighters to split off and form new brigades.

Meanwhile, recruiting techniques now focus more on sectarian angles than religious ones. There are fewer true believers among Shia fighters, and this has a trickledown effect on local communities. Although older fighters still believe that they are supposed to lead all Muslims, the younger fighters do not necessarily follow the Khomeinist philosophy. The lack of ideological vetting has diminished their effectiveness in a manner similar to that seen among Soviet forces when they invaded Afghanistan. Eventually, Sunnis in the region will react in increasingly radical ways if they become convinced that all Shia are agents of Iran. Some Shia groups do believe they are fighting for *velayat-e faqih* (the doctrine granting Iran's Supreme Leader authority over Muslims), but others merely recite the words without conviction.

The Shia militia effect is also spreading to unexpected quarters. In Gaza, a group of Palestinian Shia militants called al-Sabirin emerged a few years ago and planned attacks against Israel. They will likely strike again, since Iran prefers groups that can be used multiple times over disposable cells.

In terms of equipment and tactics, many of these groups do not use traditional vehicles and arms, instead resorting to reconnaissance drones and similar measures. Such tools could present dangerous new threats to U.S. troops.

American policymakers also need to realize that Iran's current network of regional alliances is not permanent—relationships shift all the time, and the notion of constant allies is a fiction. Understanding Iranian ideology will allow Washington to counter it more effectively. Iranian operatives know how to work with individuals and splinter groups, while U.S. policy tends to be more binary in determining allies and adversaries. Going forward, U.S. officials should learn how to better utilize religious networks in the region. They should also take advantage of the fact that Iran overestimates its influence in certain quarters, particularly within the Iraqi army.

This summary was prepared by Jackson Doering. ❖



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