



Iran and Hezbollah in Syria: U.S. Policy Options

Hanin Ghaddar

Friedmann Visiting Fellow, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy

Testimony submitted to the House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on Middle East and North Africa
September 27, 2018

Chairman Ros-Lehtinen, Ranking Member Deutch, and distinguished committee members, thank you very much for inviting me to testify at today's hearing. It is an honor to speak to you today about U.S. policy toward Syria, focusing on Iran and Hezbollah's roles in that war-torn state.

Through a Russian-Turkish agreement, the Syrian regime's offensive on Idlib has been avoided for now. The demilitarized zone has to be set up by mid-October, in addition to the removal of radical groups and all rebel heavy weapons. If any of this fails, Russia and Iran might use it as an excuse to push for the offensive, which will lead to a humanitarian, diplomatic, and military crisis, potentially prompting a U.S. response.

Iran has no direct strategic interest in Idlib, mainly because the evacuation process in the two Shia towns of al-Fua and Kefraya was completed this past July. However, Iran wants to eliminate the armed opposition. Moscow, like Damascus and Tehran, also wants Idlib resolved, but prefers to have the opposition surrender and integrate into the Syrian military divisions under its control (such as the 5th Division) rather than continue the costly fight.

Even if the agreement lasts, both Iran and Russia have managed to consolidate their power in Syria—through coercion—making it difficult to establish peace and stability. In this testimony, I will examine the role of Iran and its main proxy, Hezbollah, their primary goals in Syria, the means they are using to achieve these goals, and offer some recommendations on how Washington can best counter Iran and its terrorist proxies in Syria.

SYRIAN DYNAMICS

In the past seven years, Iran has been directly involved in the war in Syria, as it attempts to achieve four main goals:

1. Protect the Assad regime against the opposition.
2. Increase its presence and influence in Syria, and build weapon-production facilities.
3. Maintain Syria as the vital bridge between Iraq and Lebanon.
4. Get closer to the Golan Heights to create another potential front against Israel.

Today, although Iran has achieved most of these goals, the challenges to its power consolidation are not trivial. Iran has been facing significant challenges due to its newly developed role in Syria, and these challenges—financial and structural—are reflected in the evolution of its most prestigious proxy—Hezbollah. This does not mean that Iran will reconsider its Syria involvement. On the contrary, regional hegemony is the main priority of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), and the group will keep fighting for regional power as long as the primary casualties of this campaign are non-Persian Shia (i.e., Arabs and Afghans) who comprise the foot soldiers in Iran’s regional militias. But these challenges present opportunities that could be used to counter Iran in Syria and the region.

IRAN’S TACTICAL OBJECTIVES

Secure the Lebanese-Syrian Border

Hezbollah’s first mission was to protect this border—from both sides. The reason was not to protect Lebanon—as their leaders claimed—but to guarantee the Shia militia’s long-term control over the border. Hezbollah’s objective is to ensure the flow of weapons from Syria to Lebanon without interruption.

Hezbollah’s first serious battle was in 2013 in the town of al-Qusayr—on the Syrian side of the border, a battle in which the militia first suffered substantial losses of commanders and trained fighters. Then in July 2017, Hezbollah launched the campaign for Arsal—a town on the Lebanese side of the border also controlled by the Islamic State (ISIS).¹ Hezbollah today enjoys unchallenged areas of control around the Lebanon-Syria border, and a secure supply line to and from its home country. The U.S.-backed Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF), which ostensibly patrols this frontier, is not making any effort to stem the movement of Hezbollah personnel and material across this border.

Create a Parallel Military Structure Independent from the State’s Army

This military structure—under the leadership of Hezbollah on the ground—is composed of all Iranian-backed Shia militias. Individually, these fighters may look scattered and containable, but in reality, they are very well organized under Qods Force (QF) command.

To understand how these Shia militias function, one needs to see them as they see themselves: not as a loose assortment, but as a single army with a very clear structure and hierarchy. As implied already, most Shia militias fighting in the region today are organized, trained, and funded by the IRGC and its Qods Force.

In 1982, Iran created Hezbollah as a parallel military structure to the LAF, and it has since evolved to become stronger than the state and its army. One might actually claim that Lebanon is the weak state within Hezbollah’s state. This success prompted Iran to apply the model in Iraq via the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF), which also are trying to infiltrate and dominate Iraqi state institutions, just as Hezbollah succeeded in doing in Lebanon.

¹ Hanin Ghaddar, “Arsal: The Last Hurdle to Hezbollah’s Safe Zone,” PolicyWatch 2836 (Washington Institute for Near East Policy, July 21, 2017), <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/arsal-the-last-hurdle-to-hezbollahs-safe-zone>.

It is more complicated to do so in Syria; thus, the situation requires an altered model. Shia make up around 2 percent of Syria's population, including Ismailis and Twelvers.² Alawites, the Assad clique's sect, are their own esoteric group partly influenced by Shia beliefs.³ Because of the community's small size in Syria—about 8 percent of the total population when the war started—Iran has steadily brought in Shia foreign fighters, including Lebanese Hezbollah members in addition to militias from Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Iraq.

Iran and Hezbollah also helped create local pro-Iran groups, consisting of Syrian fighters who primarily report to the Qods Force, not to the Syrian regime.⁴ Iran wants to make sure that its presence in Syria is permanent, and if their own foreign fighters were forced to leave, they would leave behind a strong residual local force only loyal to Tehran. Iran will continue to strengthen its foothold in Syria and the Levant, among Shia communities specifically, by creating parallel entities with the aim of making them stronger than state institutions.

Protect Damascus as the Regime's Capital via Demographic Changes

To protect Damascus, Iran and Hezbollah have worked very diligently over the past six years to secure the suburbs of Damascus. Consolidating control of these suburbs has required systematic and deliberate demographic changes, specifically the ethnic/religious cleansing of Sunni communities, who were pushed out and often replaced with pro-regime groups consisting of Shia and Alawites.

In April 2018, the Assad regime issued the new "Law No. 10" designed to help change Syrian demography. The law gives property owners thirty days to seek out a local administrator and file an ownership claim. In most cases, however, the property owners—mostly Sunni Muslims—left because of the war and can't return within a month.⁵ Likewise, many are regime opponents who face arrest or execution should they return. Refugees who don't make it back and file a claim will have their property confiscated, repossessed, or repurposed. And those who do return might only be able to claim a small compensation before the regime takes their land and property.

Many Syrians fear that the regime plans to redistribute the properties of its Sunni citizens to Assad supporters and non-Syrian Shia proxies, providing residences for Iranian-backed Shia militias operating in Syria and their families, making their presence in the country permanent.⁶ In fact, numerous witness accounts confirm that Iraqi families, particularly from the Shia-populated southern provinces, are being transferred to Syria to repopulate the recently evacuated Damascus

² Branches of Shia Islam.

³ Phillip Smyth, "Iran Is Outpacing Assad for Control of Iran's Shia Militias," PolicyWatch 2955 (Washington Institute for Near East Policy, April 12, 2018), <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/iran-is-outpacing-assad-for-control-of-syrias-shia-militias>.

⁴ Phillip Smyth, "How Iran Is Building Its Syrian Hezbollah," PolicyWatch 2580 (Washington Institute for Near East Policy, March 8, 2016), <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/how-iran-is-building-its-syrian-hezbollah>.

⁵ Matthew R. J. Brodsky and Bassam Barabandi, "Piercing Through Assad's Reconstruction Mirage in Syria," *National Interest*, August 29, 2018, <https://nationalinterest.org/blog/middle-east-watch/piercing-through-assad%E2%80%99s-reconstruction-mirage-syria-29962?page=0%2C1>.

⁶ Ibrahim Abu Ahmad, "Assad's Law 10: Reshaping Syria's Demographics," *Fikra Forum* (Washington Institute for Near East Policy, September 17, 2018), <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/fikraforum/view/assads-law-10-reshaping-syrias-demographics>.

suburbs. Harakat Hezbollah al-Nujaba (HHN), an Iraqi Shia paramilitary force close to Iran, has reportedly overseen the resettlement of hundreds of such families.⁷

This process has taken place in many other areas that connect Damascus to the Alawite coast and the Lebanese border.

Establish Roots

A more challenging yet systematic approach by Tehran to establish its power in Syria is by spreading the *velayat-e faqih* ideology—a particularly post-1979-revolution Iranian Shia tradition conferring political power on the mullahs and rejecting the division of religion and politics—by means of creating religious centers and schools, such as *husseiniyat* [congregation halls for Shia commemoration ceremonies] and mosques. This has been a very successful approach in Lebanon, where historically the Shia community had, until recent decades, accepted a separation of state and religion. However, with Russian support, the Assad regime seems to have been able to close a number of these centers throughout Syria. Nevertheless, Iran has succeeded in transforming some of the collective religious and cultural practices, mainly in Damascus and Sayyeda Zainab neighborhood, where many of the IRGC and Hezbollah officials now reside. For example, lately Damascus has witnessed unprecedented events for Ashura when, on the tenth of Muharram (the first month of the Islamic lunar calendar), Shia commemorate the self-described martyrdom of the Prophet Muhammad’s grandson, Hussein, at Karbala, in 680 AD.

While Syrian law does not allow foreign citizens to buy or own real estate, the Syrian regime has made an exception for Iranians, who are increasingly buying up Syrian lands. These investments appear to be done not only with Bashar Assad, but also with many Shia militia groups. Portions of these lands are located near Shia religious sites, such as the Sayyeda Zainab and Ruqayya shrines in Damascus.⁸

IRAN’S CHALLENGES

Hezbollah’s Discontents and New Regional Role

Hezbollah is Iran’s main proxy force in the region, and the Qods Force relies heavily on the organization to lead and train the various Shia militias it commands. As Hezbollah became more involved during the war in Syria, its main priority was to defend Damascus, while protecting the surrounding suburbs and “useful Syria,” which links the Alawite coast to the borders with Lebanon.

Another priority for Hezbollah was to lead all its Shia fighters to control the Syria-Iraq border. This operation succeeded to secure Deir al-Zour, specifically the Abu Kamal, which is 600 km away from the Lebanese border, thereby securing the land bridge, or Shia crescent, that would

⁷ Martin Chulov, “Iran Repopulates Syria with Shia Muslims to Help Tighten Regime’s Control,” *Guardian*, January 13, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/jan/13/irans-syria-project-pushing-population-shifts-to-increase-influence>.

⁸ Majid Rafizadeh, “How Iran Continues to Profit from the Syrian War,” *Arab News*, February 23, 2018, <http://www.arabnews.com/node/1252101>.

connect Iran to Lebanon via Iraq and Syria. Also, to achieve proximity—as much as possible—to the Syrian-Israeli border.

In light of these updated missions, Hezbollah's role has expanded from that of a local militia to a key player in Iran's regional army—and it continues to expand its regional portfolio. Along with its Iranian sponsor, the Lebanese group is accumulating influence among Shia and nominally Shia communities across the Middle East, including the Houthis in Yemen. Experience in Syria and elsewhere, meanwhile, has endowed the group with advanced military capabilities.

While the IRGC still serves as a supervisory entity, Hezbollah, Iran's top Arab Shia force is itself training and leading Iraqi, Syrian, Pakistani, Afghan, and Yemeni Shia militias. Indeed, as Iran's role in the region grows, so does that of Hezbollah. This gives Hezbollah more confidence when faced with its other domestic and regional challenges; the group believes that during its next war—possibly with Israel—these Shia militias will come to its aid.

HEZBOLLAH'S CHALLENGES WITH GROWTH

Just as the 2006 Lebanon war helped Hezbollah reinforce its ranks and capabilities, the recent regional war encompassing mainly Syria and Iraq has boosted the organization, to an even greater extent. Indeed, Hezbollah's weapons arsenal grew from an estimated 33,000 rockets and missiles before the 2006 war to an estimated 150,000 today. Similarly, it swelled from a few thousand members in 2006 to an estimated 20,000-plus.

But this growth came with many challenges:

1. Hezbollah is today involved in a long war in Syria and beyond, and it has lost many of its high-ranking commanders and well-trained fighters. Although the group did manage to recruit more fighters, many of these newcomers have not undergone the same training usually required by Hezbollah due to the urgency of the war. In a sense, quality was compromised for quantity.
2. Hezbollah's extensive military operations in the region have forced the group to make budget shifts, wherein most resources are now allocated to military operations, thereby limiting the group's ability to provide social services to its constituents in Lebanon. Today, only Hezbollah fighters and their immediate families benefit from social services, leaving many other Hezbollah members, employees, and supporters without access to this network free of charge. These budget shifts are, in turn, causing discontent among the Shia community in Lebanon, which has long depended on Hezbollah for services.
3. In addition to social services and the collective history of the Shia, Hezbollah has used "resistance" against Israel as a main pillar for building its popular support in Lebanon and in the region. Despite Hezbollah's oft repeated trope that "the road to Jerusalem passes through Syria," facts on the ground show a different reality: that Hezbollah is fighting Syrians but not responding to Israel's numerous attacks on its convoys and arms depots in Syria. Practically, the concept of the "resistance" has been shattered by the Syrian war. Hezbollah's base doesn't see the war in Syria from an ideological perspective, but rather from a realist one.

4. Hezbollah's involvement in a sectarian conflict, and its increase in sectarian rhetoric and practices, has prompted a loss in broad Arab backing. Following the 2006 war with Israel, Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah was improbably voted the most popular leader in the Arab world. Hezbollah today is branded by the Arab League, Gulf Cooperation Council, and Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) as a "terrorist" organization and supporter.
5. Because of the disillusionment caused by the above-noted factors, many young men have lost the urge to join Hezbollah's war in the region, or else grown fatigued from fighting on a foreign Arab battlefield. Therefore, Hezbollah has increasingly resorted to financial incentives to recruit fighters, such as fixed salaries and benefits available only to fighters given the recent budget reallocations. In a way, Hezbollah has transformed from a highly coveted career to mainly a "job opportunity" for many young Shia men from poor neighborhoods in Lebanon. The new fighters are mostly there for the financial rewards, and therefore are less disciplined and less principled. This is affecting Hezbollah's fighting force in general and changing its relationship to the Lebanese Shia community.

This list provides a number of opportunities for limiting Hezbollah's influence and expansion in the region and within the larger Shia community. A military option should certainly consider Hezbollah's regional role and the QF-sponsored Shia militias, but in terms of non-military and long-term options, creating economic alternatives for young Shia men could offer an incremental but effective alternative. Support for Hezbollah might not sour, but such openings might help wean the community away from its financial dependence on Hezbollah. While no magic bullet exists for ending the militarization of the Shia community, isolating it or accepting its isolation from the rest of Lebanon will only play into Hezbollah's hands.

Instead, Washington would be better advised to help facilitate jobs and other economic alternatives for Lebanon's young Shia, a tack that would necessarily undermine Hezbollah's ability to recruit fighters. The challenge for the international community is to persevere with this outreach to Lebanon's Shia while simultaneously limiting that organization's military role in Syria.

SHIFTS IN HEZBOLLAH FIGHTERS' PROFILES

These challenges have pushed Hezbollah to accept a new fighting force that looks very different from the one that fought its last war with Israel in July 2006. Hezbollah's new fighters—those who joined the party after Hezbollah went to Syria—are very different. While Hezbollah is known to be extremely meticulous in selecting and training its fighters, the Syrian crisis forced the party to opt for quantity over quality.

Many Hezbollah fighters and their families believe that they are paying all the costs while Iranians are reaping the benefits. As a result, significant numbers of veterans have been leaving Hezbollah, making room for a new and rather different crop of younger fighters.⁹

According to some members who have taken leave from the war or quit entirely, the newcomers are not joining the fight for reasons of ideology or self-realization. They are there to collect a salary or secure their future—they are not particularly concerned about Hezbollah's broader mission, and they tend to follow Iranian orders without complaining.

Hezbollah spent decades screening and preparing its fighters. The group's leaders picked the *crème-de-la-crème* of young Shia to join their ranks because they wanted loyal and trustworthy men. Today, Hezbollah's army in Syria is full of relatively unreliable young fighters who do not necessarily share the ethos or dedication to Tehran or the "resistance."

Whereas the older Hezbollah fighter is more ideological, more disciplined, and better trained to fight, the newer Hezbollah recruit is less ideological and more sectarian; less trained but more aggressive. The newer crop also lacks discipline. The motivation for joining Hezbollah has changed. The enemy, as well as the battlefield itself, has changed, with all the accompanying complications. Syria is a long war, with no decisive victory in sight. Social services and financial assistance have shrunk as the military budget expanded. The poor are getting poorer and the war has its own economy, with more benefits for those involved in it.

There is a stark difference in character, behavior, and motivation between the old and new fighters. There is increasing disillusionment with the war and a growing cynicism about the war's "sacredness." While some could afford to leave the fight in Syria, many others are forced to continue for many reasons, mostly power and money.

The result is a wide economic and social gap within the Shia community in Lebanon, with long-lasting repercussions for this community, Hezbollah as both a political party and an armed militia, and Lebanon. The shifts in the profile of a Hezbollah fighter has severe effects that can already be felt today in both Lebanon and Syria. But it has also changed the core of Hezbollah, its image, role, and prospects.

WILL HEZBOLLAH RESPOND TO ISRAELI OR U.S. MILITARY STRIKES?

When Hezbollah's former military commander Imad Mughniyah was assassinated in Damascus in 2008, his brother-in-law Mustafa Badreddine took his place. But when Badreddine was killed in 2016—reportedly on the orders of Iran—no official appointment was made to replace him. Instead, Qods Force commander Qasem Soleimani became the default military commander for Hezbollah and other Shia militias fighting under his jurisdiction.

Afterward, Soleimani apparently decided to adopt a more hands-on approach to Hezbollah's military operations. While veteran commanders such as Ibrahim Aqil, Fuad Shukr, and Talal Hamiyah have become Soleimani's link to Hezbollah's military divisions, they seemingly do not

⁹ Hanin Ghaddar, "Economic Alternatives Could Help Split Shiites from Hezbollah," PolicyWatch 2711 (Washington Institute for Near East Policy, October 18, 2016), <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/economic-alternatives-could-help-split-shiites-from-hezbollah>.

enjoy the trust and advisory capacities that Mughniyah held. Furthermore, the group's newer commanders still lack deep experience and operational capabilities.

The shift to more direct Iranian command began to surface a few years into the Syria war. One indicator came from recent sanctions efforts against Iran, which revealed that the country's financing to Hezbollah had increased over the past six years. The increased investments have had visible effects in Lebanon, where Hezbollah and its political allies recently won the parliamentary elections. By intervening in Syria and other parts of the region, Hezbollah has been paying Iran back for past favors, but in the process has tied itself even more closely to the IRGC.

Iran has wanted different things from Hezbollah at different times. With the Syrian opposition nearly defeated, the Qods Force's mission turned to establishing permanent bases all over Syria. Iran leased space in more than twenty Syrian military installations to house the IRGC's artillery, armor, drones, ballistic missiles, foreign militia proxies, and Special Forces units, each of which has its own weapons depots, runways, and missile launchers.¹⁰

Yet Tehran's visible effort to entrench itself in Syria for the long term has led to direct confrontations with Israel, and a wider showdown would force the IRGC to go beyond the Qods Force's proxy approach.

In early May, IRGC missile forces in Syria fired some twenty rockets toward Israeli positions in the Golan Heights in a limited response to Israel's earlier attacks on Iranian installations in Syria. The salvo seemed at least partly intended to test Israel's response, which ended up being vast and (appropriately) disproportionate, targeting nearly all Qods Force installations in Syria. Introducing Hezbollah to a confrontation between regular Iranian and Israeli forces would undoubtedly heighten the chances of serious escalation involving Lebanon—and Tehran is currently not prepared for such a conflict.

As Syria becomes the main potential venue of Iranian-Israeli confrontation, Tehran seems to be tasking Hezbollah with establishing fuller control of Lebanon, a vital forward base for the Islamic Republic.

In this sense, Hezbollah is Iran's strongest foreign pawn to play against Israel—yet also its last resort. The group's hold over Lebanon cannot be sacrificed in an open confrontation with Israel at this point. Despite the potential for continued covert operations abroad, Iran will probably keep Hezbollah from retaliating militarily from Syria or Lebanon. The group is unlikely to be used directly until Iran feels it needs to send a strong message to Israel or launch a full-fledged war.

IRAN STILL EYES SOUTH SYRIA

Following a deal between Jordan and Russia in July 2018, Assad has retaken territory in south western Syria from rebels, closing in on the Golan. Russia has reassured Israel that only Syrian forces will be deployed on or near the Syrian-held Golan.

¹⁰ Hanin Ghaddar and Nader Uskowi, "Iran Will Spare Hezbollah in Its Conflict with Israel, for Now," PolicyWatch 2977 (Washington Institute for Near East Policy, June 5, 2018), <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/iran-will-spare-hezbollah-in-its-conflict-with-israel-for-now>.

The question is whether Russia can actually guarantee anything when it comes to Iran's presence on the ground. First, it is unlikely that Russia would guarantee the departure of Iranian forces and proxies from the south, one of the most strategically important areas in all of Syria. Second, assuming the Assad regime manages to expel the Syrian opposition from Deraa, would his forces stop Iranian proxies from infiltrating and controlling the border region?

Besides the growing difficulty of distinguishing Iranian proxies from Syrian regime forces (Shia fighters are integrating within certain brigades by wearing either Syrian army uniforms or civilian clothes), Russia's general inability, or unwillingness, to keep its promises in Syria warrants skepticism about its latest security guarantees in the south. For example, when Assad used chemical weapons against civilians in 2013 and the United States was poised to launch military strikes in retaliation, Putin helped convince Washington to hold off by guaranteeing that the regime would surrender its chemical arsenal. Yet Assad kept much of that arsenal and has since used it repeatedly against civilians.

Even more tellingly, Russian forces were rebuffed earlier this month when they accompanied the Syrian army's 11th Division to push Hezbollah forces out of their positions in the border town of al-Qusayr. The plan—which was not coordinated with Iran or Hezbollah—was to take over the Jusiya crossing with Lebanon, then move closer to Syria's Qalamoun region. Yet Hezbollah forces refused to leave their positions; instead, Russian and Syrian troops turned around and left less than twenty-four hours after they arrived, and Hezbollah soon reinforced its presence around al-Qusayr. This small incident—which was probably a Russian attempt to test Iran's reaction—shows that Moscow would probably be unable to dislodge Iranian proxies once they become entrenched in south Syria (or, at least, unwilling to exert heavy enough military pressure to force the issue).

Even if Hezbollah and other militias do withdraw a few kilometers away from the frontier, this would not resolve broader concerns about Tehran's long-term strategic game in Syria. Iranian forces have withdrawn and redeployed many times in many places in Syria, and any move they make to appease Russia would no doubt be temporary.

As for the notion that Assad will push Iran out after achieving victory, the return of his forces to the south means just the opposite. In a major step toward fulfilling Tehran's long-term goals, the presence of Syrian forces would serve as a conduit for Hezbollah and other militias to quietly redeploy in the south anytime they like, without having to deal with opposition pockets.

Therefore, to avoid escalation in south Syria, Assad's forces should be monitored very closely, and Russian forces should not be trusted to act as guarantors of Iranian withdrawal. The only surefire way of keeping Iran out of the south and far from the Golan and Jordan would be a third-party buffer zone along Syria's southern borders, or continuous Israeli kinetic action. The line distinguishing Iranian and Syrian forces grows ever thinner every day, so the need to pursue such alternatives is urgent.

THE LAND BRIDGE AND RUSSIA'S INTERESTS

Regardless, Iran—with new Shia recruits from Lebanon, Iraq, Afghanistan, and Pakistan—has almost completed its regional plan. Today, Iran's pan-Shia army is founded, funded, and trained

by the IRGC in order to consolidate Iranian control over the region. In Syria, this Shia army's main mission is to protect the "useful Syria"—which is a geographic corridor stretching from the Alawite coast, through Homs, the suburbs of Damascus, all the way to al-Qalamoun at the borders of Lebanon. It also goes through Homs to the borders of Iraq through Aleppo and Deir al-Zour, thereby linking Syria to Iraq through Tal Afar, where the PMU are very active.

Although a land bridge might not be of major significance to Tehran in terms of transferring weapons, it would provide a larger platform for projecting power and establishing an uninterrupted Iranian presence in Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon. In that scenario, would these countries be able to survive as independent and sovereign nations? Another question is whether a strengthened Iranian presence along this corridor would add fire to the radical anti-Shia narrative espoused by the Islamic State, fueling a resurgence of the degraded terrorist organization and exacerbating the area's existing sectarian conflicts.

A land-bridge that carries a sectarian component and narrative only highlights the sectarian identities and weakens national identities in the countries it covers. An Iraq or Lebanese Shia will be a Shia first and Iraqi and Lebanese second. This will not only be beneficial to Iran and its Shia ideology, but also for radical Sunni groups who will use the growing sectarian identities to regroup and strategize a stronger comeback.

Despite the Russian intervention in Syria and its boosted control over Syria's state institutions, Iran's "useful Syria" is still intact. Russian President Vladimir Putin does not mind an Iranian corridor in Syria as long as Tehran does not try to challenge Russian preeminence in Damascus. And Iran knows that it needs Moscow, given that the incoming Trump Administration has signaled a tougher U.S. stance on sanctions and Iranian regional meddling. If Russia wants to call the shots on the international front while Iran secures its position in Syria, Tehran will not make too much noise. Iran and Russia seem to have established control in Syria without an overlapping of each other's interests. Russia is investing in state institutions, mainly security and military institutions, while Iran is investing in parallel institutions. As long as these two don't collide, for the time being, the Russian-Iranian alliance will remain intact.

CONTAINING IRAN IN SYRIA

In the past eight years of the Syria crisis, Iran has never been a factor for stability in Syria or the Levant. In addition, Iran and its proxies have been threatening U.S. interests in the region as a whole and paving the way for the resurgence of Sunni jihadism after the defeat of ISIS. Thus, countering Iran's operations in Syria is vital to stabilize Syria and its neighboring countries, and to constrict the availability of fertile ground for jihadi groups.

Although Iran has managed to achieve most of its main goals in Syria, these achievements are still fragile and vulnerable. The United States could use these weaknesses to counter Iran in Syria and the region, but a strategy with a clear idea of post-conflict Syria is essential. Washington should compete with Iran where it is weak, and offer alternatives by means of diplomacy or force.

Expose Assad's Regime

For example, Assad is very hard to maintain and sell. In addition of killing more than 400,000 Syrians, and using chemical weapons against his own people, Assad is only helping Iran and Russia grow their influence in the region, and will continue doing so. The humanitarian costs resulting from his methods keep rising, lest we forget about the largest refugee crisis in the world. Therefore, maintaining the line that Assad has to go is important, but also focusing the narrative on Assad's war crimes and his dependence on Iran could help. The Assad regime today is not the best alternative for Syria, mainly for these two reasons, and keeping him in power is only going to help Iran and Russia.

Counter Demographic Changes

The conscious effort to change Syria's demography is a major issue. Not only does it highlight a sectarian division of Syria and its communities; it also encourages sectarian identities and thereby fuels both Sunni and Shia jihadism. The return of refugees to Syria needs to be negotiated along these lines. The United States can work with Europeans—and refugee host countries, such as Lebanon, Jordan and Turkey—to ensure that refugees are allowed to return to their hometowns, maintain their land and properties, and are guaranteed safety along the way. At the same time, it is essential to defend refugees from being forced into mandatory conscription into Assad's army upon their return to the country.

Prohibit Iran's Militias from Infiltrating the South

Iran's militias, mainly Hezbollah, cannot be allowed to infiltrate to the south of Syria and be close to the Golan Heights. These militias are already facing Israel's attacks and suffering great losses. However, they will not stop trying. South Syria cannot be left alone for Assad's forces to control, as Iran can and will eventually infiltrate them, one way or another. Israel is currently capable of protecting its border, but when Iran decides to use Hezbollah and launch a full-fledged war, and other militias are asked to join from both Lebanon and Syria, Israel will certainly not be left on its own. It's better to avoid such a war and make sure Iran does not have access to the southern Syria front.

Provide Alternatives to Tribes along the Land Bridge

The land bridge is still vulnerable in places where Sunni tribes are present. Today, these tribes have resorted to coordination with Iran to protect themselves; however, if provided with an alternative, they would rather avoid Iran's influence on their culture and communities.

Deepen Work with Local Allies

Iran's strategy has mostly been about filling the vacuum, mainly that left by the United States in Syria and other parts of the region. If the United States maintained its presence, continued to work with local allies, boosted coordination with regional partners, and increased its military footprint where Iran is mostly invested, this would fill a critical vacuum and deny Iran opportunities to expand its influence. From the perspective of regional actors, American consistency and predictability are crucial. This means defining, communicating, and sticking to specific commitments.

Go After Hezbollah's Lebanese Allies

Hezbollah has moved to the region, but Iran still considers Lebanon its operations room—and most significant achievement. Lebanon is not only Iran’s main front against Israel; it also offers Iran a regional backyard to initiate and coordinate their regional military operations, mainly in Syria. Accordingly, Lebanon remains Iran’s most successful and vital space in the region, and Hezbollah’s hometown. Countering Iran in Syria can be more sustainable if Hezbollah is also weakened in Lebanon.

On the political level, although Hezbollah won the parliamentary elections in May 2018, it has done so through its allies.¹¹ Without these allies, such as President Michel Aoun’s Free Patriotic Movement party and bloc, and Speaker of the Parliament and head of the Amal Movement Nabih Berri, among others, Hezbollah will hold only thirteen seats.

Sanctioning Hezbollah is important, but Hezbollah’s economy is cash-based and sanctions will not significantly affect it. However, one way is to start sanctioning Hezbollah’s allies, or enablers, who have no religious or ideological affiliation with Iran. These not only support Hezbollah and enable Iran’s control over Lebanon’s state institutions, but are robbing state institutions of its resources and participate in Lebanon’s instability by helping Hezbollah lead its regional wars from Lebanon.

However, pressuring Hezbollah should be accompanied by a strategy to create political and economic alternatives for the Lebanese people, mainly the Shia community, to make sure Hezbollah does not benefit from this pressure. For example, given that many Shia are today expressing their discontent with Hezbollah’s regional role, alternatives to Hezbollah’s social services and political narrative are absent. A long-term strategy that provides these alternatives—with very clear target beneficiaries and objectives—can at least show the Lebanese Shia that Hezbollah is not their only choice. The growing level of discontent among the Shia community in Lebanon is an opportunity that requires serious consideration.

¹¹ Hanin Ghaddar, “What Does Hezbollah’s Election Victory Mean for Lebanon?” PolicyWatch 2966 (Washington Institute for Near East Policy, May 8, 2018), <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/what-does-hezbollahs-election-victory-mean-for-lebanon>.