

BEYOND PROXIES: IRAN'S DEEPER STRATEGY IN SYRIA AND LEBANON

Hamidreza Azizi, Julien Barnes-Dacey

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SUMMARY

- The war in Gaza is pushing the shadow conflict between Iran and Israel out into the open. There is a grave risk that this escalates further in Lebanon and Syria – where Iran wields powerful influence – and spirals into a full-blown regional war.
- The intensifying conflict in Syria and Lebanon is the result of Israel's escalating response since Hamas's attacks on 7 October and Iran's "forward-defence" strategy, which aims to confront potential threats before they come close to Iranian borders.
- Iran's strategy is underpinned by a decades-long effort to embed its influence in Lebanon and Syria. Western governments will not find this easy to dislodge, and an intensified coercive strategy to push Iran out of the Levant would likely be counterproductive.
- But Iran's focus on preserving its influence and deterrence capability – which trumps its ideological commitment to supporting Palestinians and fighting Israel – offers opportunities to prevent a wider war.
- Europeans should now focus on de-escalating tensions in Lebanon and Syria; increasing conditional support for actors in both countries to advance local stabilisation goals; and intensifying their backing for structural reform that can slowly dilute Iran's dominance.

Out of the shadows

The war in Gaza is nudging the longstanding conflict between Iran and Israel out of the shadows. Much international political attention remains focused on Israel's devastating actions in Gaza since Hamas's horrific attacks on 7 October. But Iran, its allies and proxies in the "axis of resistance", and Israel are also already engaged in a low-level war across the Middle East, which is edging closer than ever to a direct Iranian-Israeli clash. Iran wields its most powerful influence in Lebanon and Syria, and it is there that there is the greatest risk of the shadow conflict escalating into a full-blown regional war.

On the Lebanese front, Israel and the Iranian-backed Hizbullah movement have seen their most intense clashes since the 2006 Lebanon war. The Syrian theatre, meanwhile, risks sparking an even more deadly direct conflict between Israel and Iran. Since October 2023 Iranian-backed militias have launched more than 170 attacks against American bases in Syria and Iraq, with the United States responding in kind following the deaths of three of its soldiers in an attack on the Syria-Jordan border on 28 January. Then on 1 April, Israel bombed the Iranian diplomatic compound in Damascus. The attack – its most overt on Iranian sovereign territory to date – killed the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) commander in charge of Iran's Syrian and Lebanese operations. Iran retaliated on 13 April, launching more than 300 missiles and drones against Israel in an unprecedented, if cautiously calibrated, direct response.

These escalatory dynamics are shaped by Israel's wider response since the Hamas attacks and Iran's "forward-defence" strategy, a decades-old approach based on confronting potential threats before they reach Iranian borders. Within this strategy, Lebanon and Syria have always represented critical arenas for Tehran's strategic ambitions. Since 7 October, Tehran's allies in Lebanon and Syria have provided some military support for Hamas by tying up Israeli resources on other fronts. But Tehran has also used its influence to cement its deterrence posture against any Israeli or US targeting of Iran in response to the Hamas attacks.

The sudden death of the Iranian president, Ebrahim Raisi, on 19 May 2024 will not shift this approach. On the contrary, during Raisi's funeral, leaders of Iranian-backed Lebanese, Palestinian, Yemeni, and Iraqi groups met with senior IRGC commanders in Tehran. The meeting conveyed a clear message that Iran's regional strategy, primarily based on its support for the axis of resistance, will remain unaltered. Syria and Lebanon will, as such, likely remain imperilled by the risk of further escalation.

Beyond having dire consequences for an already straining Middle East, further escalation

would be hugely detrimental to European interests. If the conflict in Lebanon and Syria spreads, it will create new security threats, with malign and extremist actors likely to exploit it to launch wider operations – much as the Islamic State group (ISIS) did during the long Syrian civil war. It would also provoke significant new refugee outflows towards Europe.

To prevent this escalation, European leaders and policymakers will need a comprehensive picture of Iran's strategies and influence in Lebanon and Syria. This paper contributes to building that picture by examining Iran's involvement in those two countries and its implications for the wider Middle East. It explores the strategic context of Iran's involvement, assesses Tehran's approaches towards both friends and foes in Lebanon and Syria, and analyses recent developments as well as possible future scenarios.

The paper argues that Europeans – the European Union and its member states, but also other engaged European actors including the United Kingdom, Norway, and Switzerland – should now formulate their responses to Iran's role in the Levant around three goals: 1) in the immediate-term, prevent further escalation in Lebanon and Syria and a wider war in the Middle East; 2) in the medium-term, increase conditional support for actors in both countries, necessarily including those allied with Iran, to advance local stabilisation goals; and 3) over the longer-term, intensify European support for structural reform in Lebanon and Syria that can slowly dilute Iran's dominance.

Iran's focus on preserving its influence in Lebanon and Syria ultimately trumps its ideological commitment to supporting Palestinians and fighting Israel, as does its underlying aversion to war with the US. The country's 13 April attacks on Israel demonstrated an unprecedented willingness to assume a more escalatory position to maintain its deterrence credibility. But this was still accompanied by caution. Iranian leaders seem to have little desire for a war that would likely draw in the US directly, reverse Israel's growing international isolation, and jeopardise their hard-earned influence in Syria and Lebanon.

This offers important opportunities to forestall a wider war. Europeans should intensify their efforts to use their tools of influence and channels of dialogue to press Israel and Iran to refrain from further escalatory acts. Linked to this, European policymakers need to acknowledge that Iranian influence in Lebanon and Syria is such that an intensified Western-led coercive strategy to push Iran out of the Levant would likely be counterproductive, soliciting an aggressive response that could trigger a spiralling conflict and deeper state collapse.

Instead, Europeans should play Iran at its own game by investing over the long term in strengthening governance structures in Lebanon and Syria that can better compete with

Iranian influence on the ground. This would entail a shift away from current Western policies – notably in Syria – that risk exacerbating state collapse and providing fertile ground for Iranian meddling. Much as Iran has built up its influence in Syria and Lebanon over a period of decades, Europeans cannot expect any effort to deconstruct it to happen overnight.

The strategic context to Iranian influence in the Levant

As the cornerstone of Iran's regional policy, the axis of resistance – which includes the Assad regime and Iranian-backed militias in Syria, Hizbullah in Lebanon, Iraqi militias, Yemen's Houthis, and Palestinian factions including Hamas – is ideologically founded on the basis of opposition to US influence in the Middle East and confrontation with Israel. The network shares a commitment to resisting what its members perceive as the West's imperial ambitions in the Middle East and forming a unified front against common adversaries. In this sense, the axis is more than just a political and military alliance; it is a manifestation of Iran's revolutionary ideals, aimed at reshaping the regional order to fit Tehran's anti-US and anti-Israeli vision.

At the strategic level, Iran's "forward-defence" strategy supplements this ideological foundation by transforming ambition into action. By extending Iran's influence and establishing proxy forces across the Middle East, its leaders seek to deter potential threats before they reach Iranian borders. This forward-defence concept, better known in Iranian military circles as "offensive defence", is a military strategy that integrates offensive elements within a larger framework based on deterrence. From this perspective, Iranian military strategists view the country's approach in the Middle East as an endeavour to enhance Iran's "strategic depth" – and not as an ambitious expansionist project. Their aim is to increase Iran's capacity to absorb enemy strikes and to deliver counter-strikes, all while safeguarding domestic security and territorial integrity.

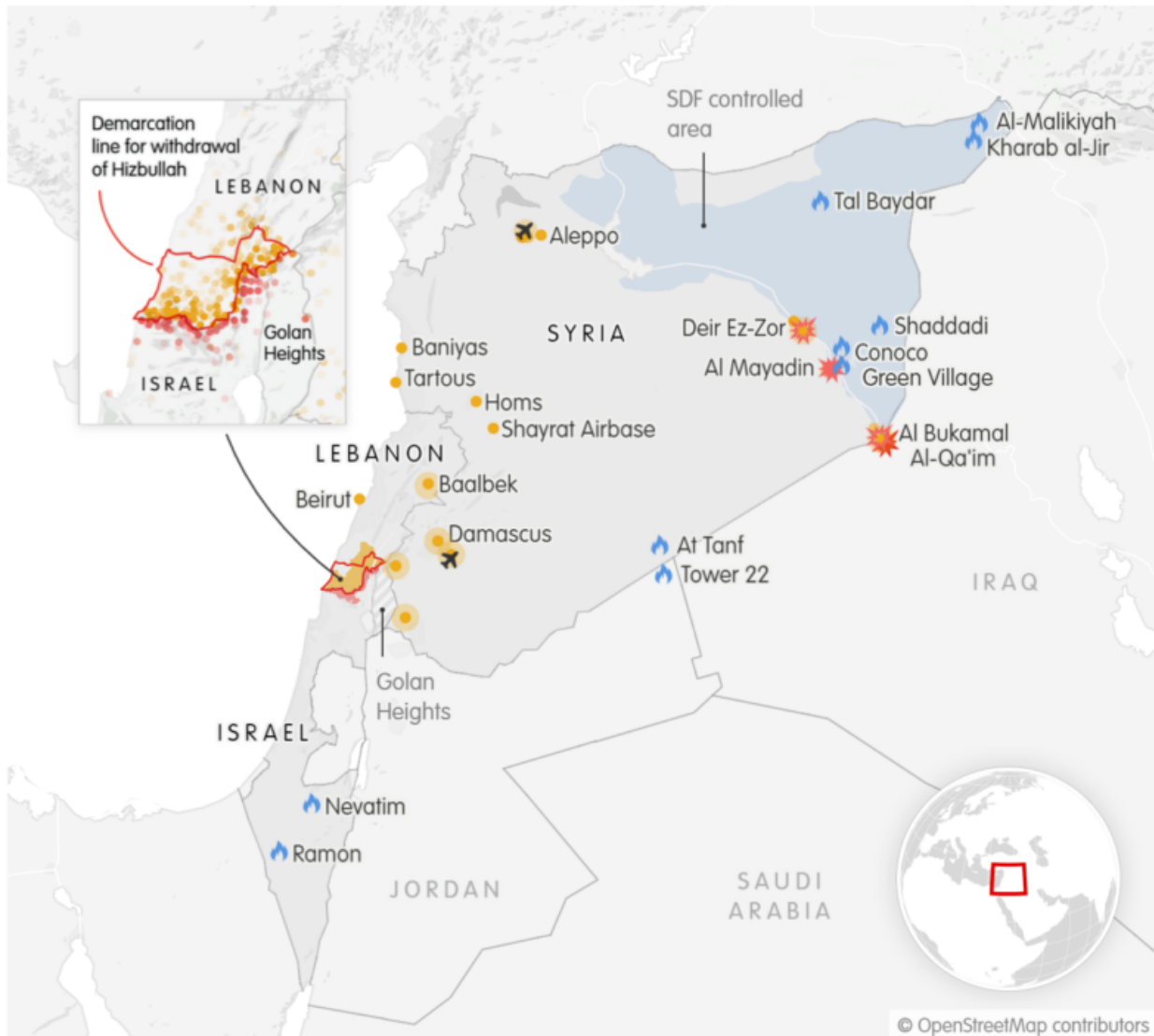
Since decades of arms embargoes have curtailed Iran's ability to develop conventional military capabilities, while its rivals in the Middle East – especially Saudi Arabia – have significantly advanced in this realm, Iran has focused on asymmetric tools, most importantly its axis of resistance allies. These tools also include the use of domestically produced drones and medium- to long-range missiles and asymmetric naval capabilities, such as speed boats, drones, and sea mines (like Iran has deployed in the Strait of Hormuz over recent years). This strategy reflects Iran's acknowledgment of the limitations of its conventional military capabilities vis-à-vis superior adversaries.

Tehran has doubled down on this strategy over the past decade as tensions with the US and Israel have escalated. The deteriorating relations have resulted in crippling economic

sanctions aimed at curtailing Iran's nuclear and regional ambitions, as well as targeted assassinations and cyber-attacks against Iran's nuclear infrastructure. This has significantly exacerbated Iranian leaders' threat perceptions, cementing their belief in the strategic importance of enhancing the country's deterrence capabilities.

Lebanon and Syria are central arenas for this strategy. Over recent decades, Tehran has built up significant political and military influence across the two countries, and senior Iranian officials now contend that Iran's "natural strategic depth" stretches all the way to the Mediterranean Sea. Geographical priorities are a guiding force for Iran's strategic focus. Iran's presence in southern Lebanon positions Hizbullah as the most significant challenge to Israel in the event of a multi-front war with the axis of resistance. Syria's Golan Heights – which borders Israel – is also of immense strategic value as a possible further layer of deterrence.

Iran in Lebanon and Syria



- Main Israeli strike locations since 7 Oct in Lebanon and Syria
- Main Hizballah strikes in Israel
- ✈ Airports
- 🔥 US and Israeli bases attacked by Iran and Iranian-backed militias
- ★ US counter-strikes into Syria

Source: ACLED; USIP
ECFR · ecf.eu

Eastern Syria, meanwhile, erves a related but rather different purpose for Tehran, acting as a land bridge to connect Iran via Iraq to Syria and Lebanon. Control of this area facilitates the free movement of Iranian and Iranian-backed personnel, supplies, and weapons across borders, which enables the rapid deployment and resupply of proxy groups.

Moreover, Iran's presence in eastern Syria allows it to monitor and increase pressure on US activities. As part of the US-led anti-ISIS mission, America maintains a small military presence in that part of the country through which it supports its allies in the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) to retain their control in the north-east. The US also maintains the al-Tanf garrison in eastern Syria, which – while part of the anti-ISIS mission – simultaneously aims to challenge Iran's influence in the area. Despite this aim, American bases in eastern Syria (just as in Iraq) have increasingly become targets through which Tehran-backed militias attack the US as Iran tries to force it from the region.

The war in Gaza has reaffirmed the value of this strategic position in Iranian leaders' thinking. As the threat of war with Israel and the US intensifies, the importance of Syria and Lebanon as core Iranian strategic interests has only grown. Leaders in Tehran now view their alliances in both countries as a cornerstone of Iran's security and increasingly as a unified deterrence front vis-à-vis Israel. This is a front built up through many years of Iranian support – a history of local engagement – that Europeans need to grasp as they consider an effective response of their own to escalating regional dynamics.

The building blocks of Iranian influence in the Levant

Iran has long demonstrated a flexible approach to building its influence in the Middle East, adapting its strategy to the unique historical and political contexts of each country.

In Lebanon, the modern phase of Iranian involvement kicked off following the 1979 Islamic Revolution, when Iran sought to spread its revolutionary ideals to the country and bolster the Shia community. This initially comprised support for established Shia entities in Lebanon, notably the Amal movement – a political party and militia established in 1974. Iran's radical vision, however, eventually clashed with Amal's more incremental strategy, a clash that in the 1980s contributed to the emergence of Hizbullah – now Iran's most significant and robust non-state ally in the axis of resistance.

Lebanese Shia leaders – inspired by the Islamic revolution and pledging religious and ideological support to Iran's supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei – founded Hizbullah to counter the 1982 Israeli invasion and occupation of southern Lebanon. These leaders then

received military training, financial backing, and ideological guidance from Iran. Hezbollah was therefore both a response to the Israeli presence in the country and a manifestation of Iran's continued efforts to export its revolution. Amid ongoing border disputes with Israel, Hezbollah's anti-occupation identity still lies at the heart of its mobilisation capacity as well as its self-declared legitimacy.

Iran's growing involvement in Lebanon corresponded with a period of pronounced Syrian influence in the country. Following Damascus's military intervention in 1976, Syria positioned itself as the main arbiter of Lebanese politics, and this remained the case for nearly three decades. But the turn of the millennium saw a significant shift. Hezbollah's guerilla warfare played an instrumental role in forcing Israel's 2000 withdrawal from southern Lebanon, which empowered the movement. Just five years later, Syrian forces also had to withdraw from Lebanon in the aftermath of the assassination of Lebanon's former prime minister Rafik Hariri, for which three Hezbollah operatives were later found guilty by a special tribunal. This opened up even more space for Hezbollah's and Iran's ascendance in the country.

The Syrian-Iranian alliance, meanwhile, has its roots in the Iraqi invasion of Iran in 1980 and the ensuing eight-year war between the two neighbours. Unlike most Arab states which supported Iraq, Syria's then-president Hafez al-Assad perceived Iraq's ascendance as a threat to his own regional influence. This led Syria to offer critical support to Iran during the conflict, laying the groundwork for an enduring alliance that bridged sectarian differences. This continues today: the Assad regime belongs to the Alawite minority – a heterodox branch of Shiism – yet rules over a predominantly Sunni country.

After the Iraqi-Iranian conflict, Syria emerged as Iran's main state ally in the Arab world and as a vital geographical conduit for Hezbollah. The eruption of the Syrian civil war in 2011 – which threatened the Iranian-aligned Assad regime's hold on power – was therefore a significant strategic crisis for Tehran. It was also a direct security threat, due to the emergence of Sunni Islamist factions such as the al-Nusra Front, an al-Qaeda affiliate. Tehran acted decisively to support the Assad regime, providing financial backing and military assistance, including the direct deployment of IRGC troops and regional Shia militias.

Current Iranian influence in the Levant

In Lebanon today, Iran's influence is institutionalised through Hezbollah, the pinnacle of Iranian clout in the Middle East. The group's representation in the Lebanese parliament and government, combined with its formidable security apparatus, allows it to decisively influence Lebanese politics, deter threats from Israel, and extend Iran's influence beyond Lebanon.

This model contrasts with the situation in Syria, where Iran's influence remains less embedded and more diffuse. Tehran instead deploys a variety of local and imported proxy militias to expand its influence in the country, more akin to its [methods in Iraq](#). These groups serve as a complementary tool to fortify Iran's strategy of backing the Assad regime. But the network also affords Iran's leaders a potential plan B to maintain Tehran's influence should Assad be ousted or change his allegiances.

Political influence

Hizbullah's military force, operating independently of Lebanese state control, was central to its consolidation of power. This is what elevated the group to the position of key domestic powerbroker and rendered it an indispensable actor within Iran's strategy. On the occasions when other Lebanese groups have sought to challenge Hizbullah's influence, the movement has deployed armed force to assert its might. In 2008, for example, when the Sunni-dominated and anti-Iranian Lebanese government attempted to dismantle the group's telecommunications network, Hizbullah [seized military control](#) of much of west Beirut.

But Hizbullah's sway extends beyond its military might, and the group has embedded itself in Lebanese society and its parliamentary system. The movement enjoys substantial support among the country's Shia community (which makes up about one-third of the population). But Hizbullah has also formed alliances with other sectarian and political groups, such as the [Christian Free Patriotic Movement](#) and the [Amal movement](#).

Hizbullah has thus created a cross-sectarian coalition that enhances Iran's influence in Lebanon's multi-religious society, securing significant representation and influence in the Lebanese parliament and cabinet. Today, Hizbullah and its allies [hold](#) 62 of the Lebanese parliament's 128 seats. The group also holds two seats in the country's caretaker government, controlling the ministries of labour and public works. This political power – namely the ability to block decisions in parliament – enables Hizbullah to advance its common interests with Iran. In recent years this has included obstructing the implementation of UN resolutions calling for the group's disarmament and the demarcation of the border with Israel. It has also deployed its political power to support the Syrian regime and the Palestinian cause.

Iran's support for Hizbullah directly undermines the authority of the central state institutions in Lebanon. Hizbullah operates as a [state within the state](#), with its own military apparatus and social welfare programmes. These parallel power structures, in tandem with a wider patronage system that sees political and economic power distributed among the country's

confessional groups, have directly weakened the central government's ability to assert its authority and address complex challenges such as the extreme economic crisis now gripping the country.

The relationship between Iran and Hizbullah is characterised by close ideological and operational alignment, mutual dependence, and a high degree of trust. Iran provides Hizbullah with extensive financial, military, and ideological support, viewing it as its most loyal and effective regional ally. Hizbullah, in turn, adheres to Iran's guidance and leadership, especially in Middle Eastern affairs, and views Iran as its primary source of legitimacy and protection. Hizbullah's leader, Hassan Nasrallah, has openly expressed his allegiance to Khamenei, committing to defend Iran in any conflict with Israel or the US.

Although the IRGC played a pivotal role in the formation and empowerment of Hizbullah, the relationship between Tehran and the Lebanese organisation has now evolved well beyond a patron-proxy relationship. In this complex and multifaceted arrangement, Hizbullah is the Islamic Republic's oldest non-state partner and most ideologically aligned regional ally. Iranian leaders trust Hizbullah's decisions implicitly, particularly in the Lebanese domestic context. The dominant view in Tehran is that what Nasrallah considers beneficial for Lebanon also aligns with the interests of Iran and the axis of resistance. [1] A prime example of this trust was Hizbullah's endorsement of a maritime delineation agreement with Israel in 2022, which, despite Iran's stance against engagement with Israel, was seen as beneficial for Hizbullah's status in Lebanon.

The 2020 US assassination of Qassem Soleimani, the former commander of the IRGC's Quds Force – its paramilitary and foreign intelligence wing – was a pivotal moment in Hizbullah's development. Soleimani had long orchestrated Iranian operations across the Middle East and was the architect of Iran's regional strategy. After his death, Hizbullah stepped up to play a more central role, reflecting the organisation's military proficiency and Iran's confidence in Nasrallah's strategic judgement. Nasrallah's effective leadership has made him an increasingly central pillar of the axis of resistance, to the extent that, according to semi-official Iranian media sources, the axis now effectively operates under a co-leadership arrangement between the Quds Force and Hizbullah.

Despite Syria's and the Assad regime's importance to Iran, the relationship is not as intimate as that between Iran and Hizbullah and faces more overt challenges. Since the eruption of the Syrian civil war in 2011, Iran has staunchly supported Assad, providing him with direct and indirect political, military, and economic assistance. This has been crucial in ensuring his survival and helping him triumph over opposition forces. But Iran and Assad do not share a strong ideological or sectarian bond; nor is Assad's dependence on Tehran absolute. Unlike in

Lebanon, the relationship is subject to the diverging interests and calculations of the two regimes. Iran has also encountered challenges from Assad's security forces, particularly from members of the more nationalistic wing of the Baath party, who are cautious of Iran's expanding influence and the potential for long-term Iranian interference in Syrian affairs.

Most recently, this dynamic was on show in Assad's unwillingness to offer strong support for Hamas – even rhetorically. Syria is the one member of the axis of resistance that has not lined up fully behind Hamas, suggesting Assad may believe that he has more to gain by presenting a more neutral position: in terms of not being drawn into a conflict with Israel, not aggravating Arab states of the Persian Gulf by encouraging escalation, and displaying a more 'responsible' face to the West.

Iran's leaders have also had to manage their relationship with Russia in Syria. Moscow is another major ally of Assad, but one whose interests and objectives occasionally diverge from those of Tehran. Most significantly, Russia has long aimed to bolster Syrian state institutions and the Syrian army, while Iran's focus is to establish and strengthen the militias and proxies that operate alongside formal state institutions.

Differences also arise between Tehran and Moscow regarding the former's ambition to use Syria as a base against Israel. Unlike Iran, Russia had long cultivated close ties with Israel through which it aimed to increase its strategic importance by intervening between conflicting regional parties – including Iran and Israel. In Syria, this involved Russian efforts to prevent conflict between the two sides but also steps that directly impinged upon Iranian interests, notably not blocking Israeli attacks on Iranian assets in Syria and working to prevent Iran from establishing a permanent presence on Syria's southern border. It remains to be seen how much the Ukraine war, which has pushed Russia closer to Iran; and the Gaza war, which has disrupted Israeli-Russian ties, affect this dynamic.

These divergences have allowed Assad to manoeuvre between Iran and Russia, securing support from both yet still maintaining a degree of autonomy. Assad now seeks to use Syria's accelerated normalisation efforts with Gulf monarchies to further diversify his sources of support. It will not have escaped leaders in Tehran that this diversification could restrict Iran's freedom of manoeuvre in Syria's future, from its political influence to its ability to profit from economic reconstruction. The concern for Tehran would be that Gulf Arab states that have normalised relations with Israel through the Abraham Accords might try to mediate between Syria and Israel to convince Assad to reach some sort of agreement with Israel; or at least limit Iran's ability to expand its anti-Israeli infrastructure in Syria.

The visit of Iran's late president to Damascus in May 2023, shortly after Syria's reintegration

into the Arab league, served as a reminder for Assad and the world that Iran remained the country's most important supporter. Raisi also used the visit to frame Syria's Arab reintegration as a sign of victory for the axis of resistance. In that sense, he used the trip to emphasise Iran's strategic interest in Syria just as new rivals began to enter the scene.

But the expanding process of Arab normalisation with Syria also presents opportunities for Iran. Iranian leaders interpret Syria's return to the fold as an Arab acknowledgment of the realities on the ground, centred on Iran's deep infiltration across Syria and the enduring strategic nature of ties between Assad and Tehran. Iran also seems to be trying to link its own rapprochement process with Arab states – such as its March 2023 agreement with Saudi Arabia – to Arab-Syrian normalisation. This could allow Iran to open up new spaces for economic cooperation in Syria with Gulf Arab states. In Lebanon, meanwhile, Tehran's aim is for the same process to facilitate the establishment of a government able to effectively deal with an economic crisis that has had negative implications for Hizbullah.

Nevertheless, Iran's position in Syria remains more exposed than it is in Lebanon. Iranian leaders therefore continue to work to expand parallel channels of influence that are directly accountable to their control. On the political front, Iran engages with and provides support for local communities to establish its own bottom-up influence – especially among Shia communities and other religious minorities. It also promotes its ideological and cultural values and symbols in Syria, including the Islamic revolution, Shia martyrs, and Iranian holidays and rituals. This approach has been particularly evident in the areas west of the Euphrates river in the eastern province of Deir Ezzor, which has effectively become Iran's core zone of influence in Syria. There, Iran encourages conversion to Shiism among locals, as well as the migration and settlement of Shia Afghan and Pakistani mercenary forces to those areas.

Since August 2023 Iran has also sought to leverage deepening grievances between Arab tribes and the Kurdish-led SDF to increase its influence in eastern Syria. The tension stems from local discontent with perceived anti-Arab SDF governance and neglect for the region's economy and services. The situation has provided fertile ground for Iran to foster alliances with tribal factions that are increasingly opposed to the SDF's rule, as evidenced by the SDF's seizure of Iranian anti-tank rockets from these forces.

However, Iran's efforts to cultivate a loyal and popular base in Syria have faced more challenges and opposition than they have in Lebanon. Underpinning this is the sectarian and ethnic diversity of Syrian society, which results in a much smaller Shia minority population, as well as widespread public anger about Iran's role in propping up the brutal Assad regime. Tehran has thus been forced to lean more heavily on its security influence in Syria to try to

guarantee its sway.

Security influence

Maintaining a steady flow of security assistance to the axis of resistance is a core aspect of Iran's offensive defence strategy in the Levant. This includes the provision of advanced weaponry such as missiles, rockets, and drones to its partners in Syria and Hizbullah in Lebanon. Tehran has also been working on upgrading Syria's air-defence capabilities. IRGC-run training programmes ensure Syrian and Hizbullah forces are well-equipped to operate and maintain these complex systems. And the training covers more than basic operation; it includes tactical manoeuvres, intelligence gathering techniques, and even cyberwarfare capabilities. Logistical support is also crucial, with Iran providing a consistent supply of fuel, ammunition, and spare parts to keep these forces fully operational. This all enhances both countries' defensive and offensive capabilities.

Additionally, over the years, the pattern of Iran's security assistance has shifted in such a way that enables its allies to set up local manufacturing lines instead of transferring weapons systems. This was accelerated by consistent Israeli targeting of Iranian military supplies in Lebanon and Syria. Hizbullah can today deploy an arsenal of up to 150,000 missiles, most of which are produced locally.

But Iran is not a mere supplier of weapons and training. Its influence extends to active endeavours to dominate the security establishments of the two countries. In Lebanon this has meant empowering Hizbullah, which boasts of having up to 100,000 fighters (even if the true number is likely closer to 30,000), to be the dominant actor over and above the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF). While the two forces operate in parallel, the LAF is unable to challenge Hizbullah's dominant position – which also includes a network of ties with other smaller groups in Lebanon such as Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad.

In Syria, Iran's weaker natural influence has forced it to take a different approach. Iranian attempts in 2013 to replicate the Hizbullah model in Syria by forming the National Defence Forces (NDF) met with limited success. IRGC commanders indicate that Tehran set up the NDF as an ad hoc response to the evolving security situation after the 2011 uprising, with the aim of supporting the Syrian army against rebel groups. Their hope was that this would then evolve to become a loyal semi-autonomous militia akin to Hizbullah or Iran's own IRGC-affiliated Basij militia. But internal sectarian divisions, competition for resources, divergent Russian objectives for Syria, and Assad's wariness of semi-state security formations hampered the group's development.

In response, Iran focused on nurturing a web of parallel military and security forces, emulating its approach to Shia militias in Iraq. Iran's efforts to establish new local militias have been particularly notable in eastern Syria, especially in its stronghold of Deir Ezzor – where it has established several operational bases. The militia fighters number in the thousands and comprise Syrians as well as Afghan and Pakistani mercenaries. They have been led by significant Iranian figures, notably top Quds Force commander Jawad Ghaffari, better known as Haj Jawad, who oversaw Iranian-backed militias in Syria until 2021. Crucially, these groups engage not only in military operations but also in community outreach and local governance, seeking to embed themselves within the country's social fabric to deepen their control and influence.

Iran has coordinated much of its activities in eastern Syria from its headquarters in the city of Mayadin, which has become a strategic focal point for its ambitions in the Levant as it provides Tehran with access to both sides of the Syrian-Iraqi border. By organising and directing these militias, Iran created a powerful ground force that supplemented Assad's military, helping to tip the balance of the civil war in the regime's favour.

Reflecting the growing unification of the two fronts in Iranian thinking, this effort was complemented by Hezbollah extending its reach into Syria over the course of the civil war. Hezbollah formed a close military alliance with Assad, and its fighters were instrumental in supporting government forces. The group also played an important role recruiting, training, and commanding Iranian-backed militias in Syria. Nasrallah depicts this role as a “sacred duty” shared by Iran and Hezbollah.

Alongside this, Iran worked to promote loyal elements within the Syrian security apparatus and incorporate its own foreign and local proxies into the official Syrian armed forces' structure, albeit with less success. Reports indicate that Iran has managed to secure Syrian citizenship for a significant number of its Afghan and Pakistani proxies, allowing for their integration into the Syrian army's ranks. Iran also sought to formalise the integration of the pro-Assad Local Defense Forces (LDF) as parallel units within the Syrian armed forces. Loyal elements within the Syrian Air Force Intelligence, the 4th Mechanised Division, and the Republican Guard are also part of Iranian influence in Syria.

And yet, Iran's role in shaping state security structures in Syria remains relatively weak. This reflects, besides tensions with the Assad regime, its competition with Russia for influence in Syria. Russia provided Assad with critical airpower and logistical support during the civil war, making it a key military ally of the regime. Moscow maintains the upper hand over Tehran within Syria's state security structures given its longstanding relationship with the country's

military. This has created a complex dynamic wherein Iran and Russia cooperate to a certain extent, yet also pursue their own agendas. Nevertheless, Iran was quick to exploit the opportunity provided by Russia's war in Ukraine to expand its influence in Syria. Since February 2022, as part of Moscow's shifting military priorities, Russian forces have evacuated some of their bases in central and eastern Syria, leaving them to be taken over by Iran and its allied militias.

Over the last year, Russia's military support has also significantly diminished in parts of southern Syria. This has presented Iran with an opportunity to expand its influence in this strategic location on the Israeli border. Russia had long worked to block Iran from entering southern Syria as part of Moscow's engagement with Israel and Western states. Indeed, keeping Iran out was the basis of a 2018 understanding between the US and Russia, with Jordanian and Israeli support, that opened the way for the Syrian regime's return to the south. But the war in Ukraine and Russia's deteriorating relations with Israel have rendered Moscow less willing and able to restrict Iran's freedom of action at Israel's behest. While Russian forces continue to patrol parts of the south and Moscow has increased some border observation posts between Syria and Israel since the Gaza war began, Iran's influence in southern Syria is growing.

In the face of this Russian and Iranian manoeuvring, Assad has also been taking steps to try to reassert his authority, implementing changes that both dilute the potential for coups and reduce the operational leeway of both Russian and Iranian influence. This has included reshuffling key military and intelligence positions, with the aim of ensuring that the loyalty within the highest ranks of his security services remains tightly controlled by his regime. Increasingly, Assad has attempted to milk the beneficial aspects of Russian and Iranian support, while simultaneously guarding against too much dependence on or vulnerability to their agendas.

Economic influence

Iran's economic relations with Syria are deeply intertwined with its geopolitical strategy, wherein Iran serves as a pivotal supplier of oil and billions of dollars of credit lines to ensure the Assad regime's survival. In 2023 Syria imported 37.97m barrels of oil from Iran, a 21 per cent increase from 2022. Current Syrian debt to Iran is estimated to range from \$20 billion to \$50 billion.

Iran's support for Assad is underpinned by its aim to ensure the Syrian regime's survival. But it also serves one of Tehran's strategic economic initiatives, a proposed transit corridor linking Iran's Shalamcheh border via Iraq to the Syrian Mediterranean coast. This project

would enable Iran to become a connecting hub with China's Belt and Road Initiative, reviving its historic role as a trade conduit between east and west. While some Western officials and analysts interpret this project solely as a means for Iran to facilitate Iranian military support for its allies, Tehran views it as a significant strategic and economic venture that could forge new trade paths and help circumvent US sanctions.

With Assad having effectively won the civil war, Tehran is now looking to reap the economic rewards of its investment by securing prime financial gains from reconstruction efforts. The narrative within Iran regarding its involvement in Syria increasingly concentrates on such economic returns. Iranian officials, including those linked to the IRGC, have been vocal about the necessity to offset the billions spent in Syria by securing economic prospects in the Syrian market. While economic engagement between the two countries decreased significantly between 2011 and 2018 due to the Syrian civil war, new agreements have increased over recent years as the focus has shifted towards the post-conflict era. Following Raisi's visit to Damascus in May 2023, the countries signed as many as 15 cooperation agreements, spanning sectors that include energy, banking, telecommunications, and agriculture.

Despite this, Iran's economic and trade footprint in Syria has remained small. Many deals have stayed on paper, including an ambitious 2019 project to construct 200,000 housing units in Syria. Recent media reports also highlight a significant drop in Iran's exports to Syria, which amounted in 2023 to \$120m – half of what they were the year before – despite concerted Iranian efforts to increase that amount. This is mainly due to Iran's economic stagnation, underpinned by stringent US sanctions and internal mismanagement.

Some figures within the Iranian political establishment have expressed concern over the recovery of Iran's economic investment in the Assad regime, and there is increasing acknowledgment that the costs of supporting Assad have not yielded the anticipated economic advantages. In 2021 Iran's deputy chairman of the Syrian-Iranian Chamber of Commerce, Ali-Asghar Zebardast, criticised Russia's economic advances at Iran's expense. Analysts within Iran note that Russia remains in an advantageous position in securing economic concessions from Damascus – especially in sectors like energy and mining. And, with wealthy Gulf Arab states now normalising relations with Syria, the concern in Tehran is that they could also be set to profit at Iran's expense.

But the reality is that, rather than being squeezed out, no one will likely be able to take advantage of a still non-existent post-conflict boom in Syria. The economic challenges posed by heavy US sanctions on Syria, coupled with Syria's ongoing lack of security, widespread corruption, and dire economic predicament, are significantly hindering the willingness and ability of any external actor to embark on large-scale reconstruction projects. The fact that

Russia and Iran are also under intense Western sanctions and facing economic pressures at home means their ability to channel resources to Syria is decreasing – regardless of the level of competition between them. Ultimately, Iranian concerns that the country’s influence could be diluted by alternative sources of financial support appear overstated given the depth of reconstruction needs and international hesitation to engage, let alone invest, in Syria.

In Lebanon, despite the considerable influence Iran exerts through Hizbullah, Tehran’s economic impact remains even more limited and is far less central to relations between the two countries. According to one 2023 report, Iran only ranked as Lebanon’s 50th-largest trading partner, indicating a minimal level of economic interaction.

Lebanon’s profound economic crisis – characterised by financial collapse, hyperinflation, and a severe public debt burden – also poses significant challenges to Iranian involvement. This is exacerbated by the overarching impact of US sanctions on Iran, particularly those targeting the banking sector, which significantly restrict Tehran’s potential to deepen economic relations with Beirut. These sanctions not only complicate direct banking transactions but also logistics, making the transportation and shipment of goods more challenging. The complexity of these dynamics has limited the fluidity of economic exchanges, a reality that contrasts with the optimistic statements of Iranian and Lebanese officials about developing economic ties.

In these circumstances, Iran has made only limited moves to increase its economic influence, such as the provision of fuel supplies in 2021 amid the economic crisis. Tehran’s overriding focus has instead been the provision of direct support to Hizbullah, reflecting the priority it accords sustaining its primary ally in the Middle East. Direct Iranian financial support is critical to maintain Hizbullah’s operational capabilities and social services but does little to address Lebanon’s broader economic challenges. Estimates of the annual financial support provided by Iran to Hizbullah vary, but some reports suggest that, up until 2018, Iran contributed approximately \$700m per year. Hizbullah, with Iranian support, is likewise reported to be playing a role supporting the Assad regime’s illicit trade in Captagon (a cheap, amphetamine-like drug), worth billions a year. This provides the group with an important channel of extra financial support.

The implications of the war in Gaza

The war in Gaza is fuelling an escalatory cycle in the Levant that has brought Iran and Israel closer to a direct war than at any time in the past. Iran and its allies have offered some – albeit far from significant – military backing to Hamas, aiming to exert pressure on Israel to enter into a ceasefire and tie up Israeli military resources on other fronts. But Iran has nonetheless

done so carefully, including in how it launched its direct attack on Israel on 13 April, to avoid taking the fatal step that would plunge the two countries into open confrontation.

Lebanon and Syria are key fronts in this dual approach. Hizbullah has conducted an incremental escalation against Israel from Lebanon, which has included coordination with Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad. The group has fired around 1,000 rockets and anti-tank missiles into northern Israel, which have killed at least 22 soldiers and civilians and forced 60,000 Israelis to evacuate the northern border areas. As the conflict has dragged on, Hizbullah has further escalated by deploying increasingly sophisticated technology and tactics – such as missiles launched from drones within Israeli airspace – sending a clear sign to Israel of the deeper threat it now faces from the north.

The Gaza war has simultaneously provoked heightened tensions between Iranian-backed groups and the US in Syria. Since 7 October Iranian-backed militias have conducted more than 170 attacks on US troops in Syria and Iraq, which resulted in the killing of the three US soldiers on the Jordanian-Syrian border on 28 January 2024. The groups justify their attacks by pointing to US support for the Israeli war on Gaza. But they are also driven by Iran's longstanding ambition to push the US out of Syria and Iraq. Rather than a US withdrawal, however, the US deaths provoked an intensified American response via a series of missile strikes in Syria and Iraq. The Golan front, meanwhile, has remained relatively quiet since 7 October. But Tehran could use the area to open another front against Israel in the event of a wider war. Tehran has also seemingly been using its newfound influence in southern Syria to smuggle weapons, via Jordan, to Palestinian groups in the West Bank, while also allegedly using its border access to feed unrest in Jordan.

This has all resulted in a steadily escalating Israeli response (accompanied by US strikes on Iranian assets). Underlying this is the Israeli view that Iranian support was a key driver of the 7 October attacks and that it can no longer tolerate Iran's presence along its borders. In Lebanon, Israel has mounted around 4,000 attacks across the south and deep into the country as far as Baalbek. These attacks have killed as many as 300 Hizbullah fighters and civilians, and have been accompanied by a targeted Israeli assassination campaign that included the killing of senior Hizbullah figures, as well as a Hamas leader in Beirut. As many as 90,000 Lebanese have fled the attacks in the south of the country. The risk of a deeper Israeli incursion and full-scale war between Israel and Hizbullah has not been this high since 2006, with much of the Israeli security establishment of the view that Hizbullah capabilities need to be significantly weakened through a more extensive Israeli military operation.

In Syria, Gaza has provoked a qualitative shift in the long-term Israeli strategy, the “campaign between the wars”, aimed at preventing the establishment of a permanent Iranian military

presence in Syria that could threaten Israel from the north. Israel has conducted hundreds of airstrikes against Iranian and Iranian-backed targets in Syria over recent years and more than 50 since 7 October. These aimed to disrupt Iran's direct and allied militia presence, as well as the military, technological, and logistical support it provides to Hizbullah via Syrian territory. But since 7 October, the Israeli targeting strategy has changed. Israel previously limited its attacks in Syria to facilities, infrastructure, and weapons shipments, avoiding the targeting of IRGC officers. But Israel has now made the assassination of senior Iranian commanders a primary goal, with at least 18 having been killed since 7 October.

This culminated in the April 2024 Israeli attack on the Iranian consulate in Damascus. Tehran responded by launching, for the first time ever, hundreds of drones and missiles directly into Israel from its own territory, unlocking the most dangerous phase that the confrontation between Iran and Israel has witnessed over the past four decades.

The direct retaliation represented a notable shift in Iranian policy. Since 7 October, Tehran had largely avoided retaliatory action in response to Israeli and US attacks in Syria and Lebanon. Despite the killing of multiple IRGC commanders and intensifying Israeli attacks across the Levant, the Iranian response via Hizbullah had previously largely remained within the established rules of the game that limited attacks to border areas to avoid provoking further escalation. Tehran also withdrew high-ranking IRGC commanders from Syria; and IRGC head Esmail Qaani ordered Iranian-backed militias in Syria and Iraq to halt further attacks on US bases after the deaths of the three US soldiers.

But for Iran's leaders, the embassy attack was a violation too far and failing to respond would demonstrate weakness. This would further undermine the deterrence posture that lies at the heart of Tehran's forward-defence strategy. But even as Iran launched its unprecedented attacks on Israel, it continued to tread very carefully, looking to forestall rather than encourage further escalation. Details of the attack were shared with nearby states ahead of the strikes – undoubtedly in the Iranian knowledge that these would then be passed on to the US and Israel and ensure sufficient time for preparations to prevent Israeli casualties or significant damage.

Iran was also very quick to publicly call for an end to the escalatory spiral – tweeting this desire from its UN mission in New York even as the drones were in the air flying towards Israel. Iran continues to send a very clear message that it does not want a war with Israel or the US. Instead, Iran's leaders claim that their main objective was to reaffirm the former rules of engagement with Israel – that of mutual deterrence whereby confrontation is contained in the “grey zone” and does not involve direct attacks. Similarly, even as Hizbullah now continues to escalate the nature of its response to Israeli strikes, the intention appears to be to

establish new rules for mutual deterrence rather than to provoke all-out war.

This positioning reflects a clear Iranian desire to avoid getting sucked into a wider war, a point publicly emphasised by both Khamenei and Nasrallah. This is driven by a recognition that such a conflict could inflict devastating damage on Hizbullah's military infrastructure, significantly diminishing its and Iran's deterrence capability against Israel – which ultimately remains of far greater importance to Tehran than the fate of Hamas in Gaza. There are reports that Tehran is deeply concerned about the scenario of direct conflict with Israel or the US and, together with its allies in Lebanon, is seeking ways to avert it.

Underlying this is Iran's longstanding combination of pragmatism and assertiveness in responding to regional developments. Iranian-backed militias in Syria and Iraq targeted US bases long before 7 October, using this to assert a degree of deterrence and press the US to withdraw from the region. But Iran has also repeatedly shown pragmatism and flexibility in engaging in diplomatic channels and initiatives to ease pressure and secure its interests. Before the Gaza war, this included a diplomatic understanding with the US that involved Washington unfreezing \$6 billion-worth of Iranian assets abroad in exchange for Iranian-backed de-escalation in Syria and Iraq.

Still, while Iran has made clear that it wants to avoid a wider or direct conflict, that is far from a guaranteed outcome given the febrile environment in the Middle East and the dangerous cycle of escalation that is under way. The killing of the three US soldiers highlights the degree to which escalatory dynamics can have unintended consequences, which risks undermining Iranian control of the situation. Tehran may not seek direct conflict with the US or Israel, but independent militia action could still pull it into one.

Moreover, should the Gaza war escalate further or should Israel launch a wider assault on Lebanon, on other Iranian assets, or on Iran itself, Tehran may feel compelled to respond forcefully, risking just the conflict it seeks to avoid. This scenario could see more intense direct attacks on Israel (with no prior warning this time) – which Tehran says is the new equation it has established. It could also involve, unlike 13 April, Hizbullah and the Golan front as part of this attack, as well as the increased supply of advanced weaponry to Hizbullah and other militias in Syria.

The future of Iran's role in the Levant

The ramifications of the Gaza war highlight the centrality of Syria and Lebanon as critical arenas in Tehran's Middle East strategy. This means that Iran will be committed to

maintaining considerable influence in both countries for the foreseeable future.

In Lebanon, the Iranian role is firmly entrenched thanks to the intimacy of Tehran's relationship with Hizbullah and the latter's dominance over the state. Iran's influence in Syria might become less overtly assertive if the Assad regime strengthens its position, including through continued reconciliation with Arab states. But this scenario appears unlikely in the near term. The Assad regime remains heavily reliant on Iranian military and economic support. Iran has been a faithful ally to Assad over recent decades. And amid deep uncertainties as well as internal and external threats, this is a partnership he is unlikely to abandon whatever the fruits of any new engagement with Arab states.

At the same time, Iran is adept at penetrating weak states. The socio-economic collapse of Lebanon and Syria offers Tehran an environment in which it can keep expanding its influence. This is manifesting more overtly in Syria, where Iran has focused on establishing autonomous capabilities so that it can respond to a possible scenario in which Assad is eventually dislodged from power or chooses to dilute Syria's relationship with Iran.

However, this strategy also carries risks for Iran, given the widespread public frustration in Lebanon and Syria with economic hardship and foreign interference. In Lebanon, economic turmoil and political instability have already spurred criticism of Hizbullah and, by extension, Iran's influence; this is now being exacerbated by concern among some Lebanese that Hizbullah will drag them into a new war with Israel. The same scenario is visible in Syria amid Assad's failure to establish the governance and security conditions to meet core public needs, with the population increasingly seeing Iran as a foreign occupier. Iran's own diminishing economic potential also creates domestic challenges for Tehran, including by fuelling opposition to the government's external adventurism and costly regional interventions at a time when the Iranian population is facing deep economic pressures.

Nevertheless, the strategic importance of the Levant in Iranian calculations means that these challenges will be secondary to the core drivers of Tehran's regional policy: Iran is in the Levant to stay. While there is opposition at home and across the region to the Iranian presence, Tehran places enough importance in and has come far enough in securing its influence on the ground to overcome these challenges. The ramifications of the Gaza crisis are now serving to prove the value of this position to decision-makers in Tehran.

In addition to the ongoing trajectory of the Gaza conflict, American politics is likely to be one key variable that shapes Iranian behaviour in these countries, given that its leaders ultimately view the US as the key threat to its interests above and beyond Israel. The potential re-election of Donald Trump – known for his hardline stance against Iran – raises the prospect of further

escalation, regardless of the evolution of the situation in Gaza or between Iran and Israel. If Trump aims to fortify US positions in the region as part of a renewed “maximum pressure” campaign against Iran, Syria is likely to emerge as a more pronounced battleground for proxy conflict between Tehran and Washington. Many current Trump advisors take hardline anti-Iran positions, suggesting this would likely be a central feature of a new Trump term in office.

But the deep uncertainty that always hovers over Trump also means that the opposite scenario could hold true: Trump could focus on pulling American troops out of Syria, a decision that Iran would perceive as strengthening its position in the country. In these circumstances, competition will likely increase between local actors and the regime, as well as Iran, Turkey, and Russia, to fill the void left by the United States’ departure.

Three steps to respond to Iranian influence in the Levant

Iran’s forward-defence position in the Levant is strategically existential for the country amid its conflict with Israel and the US – the war in Gaza has only cemented this logic in Iranian strategic thinking. This is increasingly harmful for both Lebanon and Syria, with the embedding of Iranian-linked non-state structures undermining the state and impeding meaningful efforts to drive necessary political and economic reform to stabilise both countries. Rather than focusing on the well-being of local populations, Iran’s key interest has been deepening its own influence and that of its partners.

This Iranian embrace of strategic depth has also heightened the degree to which Lebanon and Syria have emerged as central and highly destabilising locations for conflict in the Middle East, theatres rather than actors in Iran’s confrontation against Israel and the US. Today the spectre of regional war hangs heavily over both countries as a result of this deepening confrontation. The 1 April Israeli attack on the Iranian embassy in Damascus and Iran’s retaliatory strikes against Israel on 13 April brought the region to the precipice of all-out war.

A strong European interest exists in seeing this destabilising Iranian influence diluted. But this will not be easily or quickly achieved, a reality that Europeans should place at the centre of their strategies towards the Levant. A belief that Iran can be squeezed out would be a recipe for open-ended conflict and likely failure, given the strategic importance Tehran accords its influence and the heavily securitised – and locally dominant – nature of its current presence. It is also inevitable that Iran will have greater strategic patience to see the fight in its own neighbourhood through to its end than Western actors. As such, Europeans must resist a zero-sum approach towards dislodging Iran from the Levant that will only play into Tehran’s hands.

Instead, the approach of key European actors – including the EU, France, Germany, and the UK – to Iran’s role across the Levant should be based on three goals:

1) Prevent the war in Lebanon and Syria expanding and pitting Israel directly against Iran.

While conflict levels are already intense, Europeans need to help prevent all-out war – given the deeply destabilising implications this would have for Lebanon and Syria, the Middle East more broadly, and Europe. A war in Lebanon or Syria could pull in other nearby states given the direct interlinkages between them. This would open up new space for malign security actors which threaten Europe, and result in significant new refugee flows.

Europeans should pursue this track on the basis that Iran has made clear it does not want a full-blown war and is more focused on preserving its influence in Lebanon and Syria than fighting Israel or for Palestine.

The initial focus should be preventing further escalation in Lebanon, where clashes are already intense and Israel has raised the prospect of initiating a wider conflict, which could then extend into Syria and draw in Iran thanks to the interconnections between the countries. For its part, Hizbullah has made clear that de-escalation will depend on a sustained ceasefire in Gaza, which should remain an absolute European priority given the way the current war is fuelling escalation across the region. This will need to be linked to strong pressure on Israel to not pre-emptively, or on the back of a ceasefire that frees up its military resources, launch a more extensive attack on Lebanon. European states – together with the US – should make clear that they will oppose and not provide material support for an Israeli decision to expand its war to the north.

The current efforts from the US and France to persuade Hizbullah to pull back from border areas – in accordance with 2006 UN Security Council resolution 1701 that aimed to resolve the Lebanon war – are unlikely to bear fruit. Hizbullah, with Iran’s backing, will be unwilling to give up its strategic posture as long as the Gaza war and its fallout continues. Hizbullah may also be unwilling to abide by the resolution given that its presence on the border is tied to the disputes with Israel that lie at the heart of its anti-occupation identity. Europeans should instead focus on pressing both Hizbullah and Israel to engage in initial de-escalation steps – namely stopping their tit-for-tat missile attacks – to prevent the cycle of escalation continuing.

In Syria, the immediate escalatory risks are also growing amid ongoing Israeli strikes, even if Iranian-backed militias have paused their attacks on US bases. The situation could further deteriorate on the back of any further escalation in either Gaza or Lebanon. To avoid this outcome Europeans can keep pressing all parties accordingly, but they should also look to

find a mechanism to replace increasingly unlikely Russian outreach between Israel and Iran. An obvious candidate to lead this mechanism would be the United Arab Emirates given its ties to both Israel and Iran. Some reports have suggested that Emirati president, Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nahyan, has been trying to negotiate between Israel and Syria in a bid to end Israeli attacks on Damascus airport; [2] meanwhile the recent visit of a senior Hezbollah figure to the UAE highlights how Abu Dhabi is widening its diplomatic outreach between these different actors.

Europeans should simultaneously focus on supporting efforts to prevent Iranian-US escalation in eastern Syria, as well as constructing a strategy that could prevent conflict breaking out in this area if the US withdraws its military presence. Part of this strategy should entail a continued focus on facilitating efforts to revive the West's nuclear diplomacy with Iran. This is an important end in itself, but in 2023 it was also the key vehicle for an informal de-escalation agreement between Tehran and Washington.

Europeans should also be working with the US to lay out a viable strategy to accompany the likely inevitable American withdrawal from Syria – whenever that may come. Part of this will depend on strengthening the capabilities of a more representative SDF governing body, but it will also necessitate negotiations with Turkey and a willingness to back SDF talks with Damascus in the hope of mapping out a settled and stabilising endgame rather than allowing a violent free for all once the US departs.

European engagement with Tehran can be a valuable means to keep pressing the de-escalatory case across Lebanon and Syria. Europeans should not easily jettison this access point, even as they consider other coercive tools such as increased sanctions linked to Iran's backing of regional non-state actors and behaviour related to its nuclear programme, or its support for Russia.

Indeed, the extent of Iranian influence in Syria and Lebanon highlights an inevitable reality: Iran will necessarily have to be involved in any new security understanding in the Levant, both to prevent conflict with Israel but also to ensure it does not block the prospect, however small, of eventual peace between Israel and Palestine. This is a reality that other states in the region increasingly accept, including Saudi Arabia. Once the war in Gaza ends, other international actors including Europeans will need to assess how they can support a new equilibrium that prevents conflict.

2) Leverage the concerns of Tehran's partners in Lebanon and Syria to advance shared humanitarian and stabilisation interests and counter state collapse.

If preventing all-out regional war is the immediate priority, this should not distract from the

need for Europeans to focus on the destabilising impact of Iran's influence on dynamics in both Lebanon and Syria. Even without the Gaza war, both countries have long been careering towards state collapse, an outcome that would also pose significant migration and security concerns for Europeans.

Iranian policy is a prime driver of this destructive spiral. Given the short-term impossibility of dislodging Tehran's influence, Europeans should explore how they can press Iran's partners in Lebanon and Syria to play more constructive and stabilising roles over the medium term. This would help promote stability and in so doing help block Iran's ability to keep exploiting state collapse to deepen its hold.

Europeans should premise this approach on the reality that Iran's local partners also have constituencies, pressures, and needs – even as they maintain close ties with Tehran. Europeans should design their offers with the aim of making it harder for Iran to force its partners to reject them, including by framing them through a positive stabilisation agenda rather than as an overt anti-Iranian strategy. Essentially, the EU and European states should look to offer opportunities that would encourage Hizbullah's Lebanese and Assad's Syrian identity and positioning.

This is a more intuitive approach in the case of Assad, given his aim to prevent Iran completely infiltrating Syria and fatally undermining his authority. But it could also be a possibility in Lebanon, despite Hizbullah's and Tehran's closeness. Hizbullah's willingness – and that of Iran by association – to agree to a maritime agreement with Israel last year shows an openness to deal-making when it is in Lebanon's interest (on this occasion the deal was tied to possible economic gains). This was the case even when such a deal appeared to run counter to Iran's strategic positioning. Lebanon's socio-economic crisis represents a destabilising challenge that Hizbullah needs to find ways to manage. While state collapse may help Iran in Syria by giving it space to manoeuvre around Assad, in Lebanon it could pose a threat to Hizbullah's dominance over the country.

On this Lebanese front, Europeans should therefore aim to contribute to stabilising progress on both relations with Israel and on internal dynamics. Regarding the former, Nasrallah has indicated a willingness to enter some form of new border negotiations in the event of a Gaza ceasefire, without providing specific details of what that could look like. This suggests, alongside Iran's reticence to engage in a direct conflict with Israel, that there could be space for a more sustainable arrangement with Israel as part of a new post-Gaza security equilibrium. This will clearly depend on Hizbullah being able to secure wins of its own, which will necessitate pressing Israel to also make border concessions. On the internal Lebanese question, Europeans need to focus their efforts on securing Hizbullah's support for the long-

delayed formation of an empowered new government and economic reform measures in exchange for a European willingness to provide more urgently needed financial support (above and beyond but with more conditionality than what the EU offered in a recent migration deal with Lebanon).

In Syria this approach will be significantly complicated by European distaste for Iran influence and the Assad regime. Fundamentally, however, Europeans will need to show an openness to greater, albeit cautious and conditional, engagement with Syrian government structures if they want to secure some stabilisation benefits and dilute Iranian influence. Europeans need to acknowledge that more state collapse will inevitably result in deeper instability, increased Iranian influence, and a worsening of Europe's strategic position.

Europeans should be willing to increase early recovery support for Syria as a central element of this approach, including for infrastructure projects such as those tied to water and electricity. But the approach should also involve a reappraisal of the strategic efficacy (to say nothing of the humanitarian impact) of Western sanctions.

Europeans should not walk away from their broad sanctions policy. Together with the US, however, they need to deploy it in a more effective manner. The recent renewal of the EU's humanitarian exemption introduced after the 2023 earthquake in Syria and Turkey was a positive step. But this should also include giving the UN special envoy for Syria more leeway to use sanctions as a tool to incentivise progress in a 'step for step' process, whereby the West and Syria would make incremental, transactional agreements – with a focus on addressing tangible needs within Syria – to generate confidence in a renewed political track. Europeans should also reassess the value of automatically sanctioning every Syrian government minister as soon as they enter office. They may, for example, find that engagement with a Syrian minister of local services, health, or education could facilitate progress in areas of interest without having to directly engage Assad or any core political and security levers of the brutal Syrian state. Europeans should ensure that these offers remain directly tied to the need for accompanying concessions from Damascus, including in securing the access and implementation that will be needed to ensure meaningful stabilisation. They will need to be cautious in their approach given clear challenges to effective delivery due to the significant diversion of aid by regime allies. But securing mechanisms to effectively increase assistance is in the interest of both the Syrian population and Europeans.

Europeans could further strengthen their approach to both Lebanon and Syria through close alignment with Gulf Arab states, which aim to leverage new channels of regional detente with Iran to secure stability in the Middle East. Europeans should encourage their Gulf partners to use their dialogue with Tehran to lay out the importance of stability in Lebanon and Syria and

to press Iran to make space for stabilisation tracks.

3) Support structural reform that can slowly dilute Iran's dominance in Syria and Lebanon.

Europeans need to accompany these steps with a longer-term holistic strategy to counter Iranian influence in the Levant. The last 20 years should have made clear that the coercive tools Western states embraced in pursuit of this goal have failed.

The West's "maximum pressure" campaign on Iran in its various guises has only served to empower the worst impulses of an increasingly securitised Iranian state, resulting in an ever-deepening Iranian hold on Lebanon and Syria. Rather than doubling down on an approach focused on bashing Iran down to size, which a second Trump administration may embrace anew, Europeans should focus on a more constructive agenda that can build up vehicles of legitimate and locally embedded institutional representation.

Europeans will effectively need to support a strategy that mirrors Iran's own over recent decades, albeit one focused on state rather than non-state actors. This should involve long-term investment aimed at building up the capacity and strength of Syria's and Lebanon's institutions – central and otherwise – that can act as meaningful and legitimate counterweights to Iranian influence. Europeans should work with these institutions to enable them to deliver services to local populations so that they can compete with what Iran brings to the table. This would also help counter the state collapse that sees Iran and its non-state allies thrive.

No shortcut exists to achieving this goal, and it will have to be led by local actors rather than being externally imposed. But European strategies aimed at meaningfully responding to Iranian influence in the Levant should centre on this track rather than coercive pressure.

Europeans will face some hard political choices as they pursue this long-term approach. In Lebanon, Western governments need to continue supporting institutions such as the LAF and key ministries, despite an acknowledgment that they are not functioning as effectively as they should, and that Hizbullah also holds sway over them. This will require Europeans to set out a more realistic vision of change to support reform and address corruption – a more incremental approach of principled pragmatism – rather than (typically unsuccessful) top-down European diktats.

In Syria, the challenges are greater still given that this approach means betting on a state owned by Assad. But Europeans need to be prepared to offer increased support to local and government bodies who can meet core conditions, also being cognisant of the fact that longer-term reform away from the Assad regime will be equally dependent on the ability of Syrians

to survive and drive incremental change from within. Ultimately the strategy to weaken Iran's and Assad's hold will be very similar.

A strong dimension of this approach in both countries should be sustained, long-term European support for civil society actors, interpreted in a broad sense to also include lower-level elements of the business community who represent the backbone of the middle class. Without a middle class there is no hope of the eventual emergence of viable, self-sustainable states.

Principled pragmatism

More than eight months after the brutal Hamas attacks on Israel and Israel's launch of a devastating war on Gaza, the Levant finds itself in a perilous place, close to being sucked into a broader conflict that will inflict further levels of destabilisation on local populations, thrust the region into a deep and intractable conflict, and impose significant costs on neighbouring countries, including in Europe. It would also significantly set back all prospects of pathways towards peace and stability.

Europeans must work to avoid this outcome. Success in this endeavour will nevertheless deliver a very unsatisfactory result: the management rather than the immediate expulsion of Iranian influence from Lebanon and Syria. But this is the necessary step to lay the groundwork for a shift towards a more effective longer-term strategy that can slowly dilute Iranian ascendancy from within.

About the authors

Hamidreza Azizi is a visiting fellow at German Institute for International and Security Affairs (SWP) in Berlin. Azizi holds a PhD in regional studies from the University of Tehran and was previously a lecturer at the University of Tehran (2016-2018) and Shahid Beheshti University (2016-2020). Azizi's research interests include security and geopolitical issues in the Middle East and central Eurasia, Iran's foreign and security policy, and Iran-Russia relations.

Julien Barnes-Dacey is the director of the Middle East and North Africa programme at the European Council on Foreign Relations. He works on European policy towards the wider region, with a particular focus on Syria and regional geopolitics. Previously, Barnes-Dacey worked as a journalist across the Middle East, based out of Egypt and Syria, and headed the MENA Practice at a private sector consultancy.

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[1] Author's conversations with Iran-based experts, online, spring 2024.

[2] Author's conversation with Syrian journalist, Paris, January 2024.

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