



# THE NEO-BALLISTIC MIDDLE EAST

*Over the past forty years, Iran has written the book on  
Lebanization and using non-state actors in interstate warfare*

*By Karim El-Baz*

**H**istorically, state actors were the only entities capable of developing, procuring, maintaining, and operating ballistic missiles. A ballistic missile is one that follows a ballistic (arching) trajectory to deliver one or more warheads to a specific target. The first efficient use of ballistic missiles dates back to the thirteenth century, when the Ming Dynasty in China utilized a simpler form of a winged rocket that followed a ballistic trajectory to hit enemy formations. Toward the end of the Second World War, the Nazi German Luftwaffe air force was almost destroyed and, hence, rendered incapable of delivering payloads to Allied cities. Consequently, Nazi Germany resorted to its V1 and V2 ballistic missile program to deliver the payloads to Belgium, the United Kingdom, France, and the Netherlands late in the war.

In the Middle East, Egypt and Israel were the first countries to pursue ballistic missile capabilities as early as the 1950s. On October 22, 1973, the Middle East witnessed the first operational use of a Scud missile, when Egypt launched three Scud-B missiles against Israel. Two missiles were fired at the Israeli formations that penetrated the Deversoir Gap to the west of the Suez Canal, and the third missile at the Israeli Command Center in El-Arish, the capital and largest city of North Sinai. A few years later, the Middle East witnessed a more extensive use of ballistic missiles during the Iran–Iraq War. All these examples share one thing in common—the state was the sole operator of ballistic missiles. Arms control experts tend to agree with this argument, as only state actors have the infrastructure, expertise, and resources to develop and/or operate ballistic missiles. I claim this argument as the orthodox ballistic perspective. However, many non-state actors in the twenty-first century Middle East have defied this theory due to the proliferation of ballistic systems and technologies. We can identify this phenomenon as the neo-ballistic era. Today, non-state actors, more specifically Hezbollah in Lebanon and the Houthis in Yemen, have become capable of operating ballistic missiles.

◀ *Yemen's Houthi forces  
launch a ballistic missile aimed  
at Saudi Arabia, March 25, 2018.  
Houthi Military Media Unit/  
Handout via Reuters*

This essay does not discuss how non-state actors became operators of such ballistic missiles which, like any other weapons systems, are a means not an end. The most relevant question is what purpose these systems serve in the hands of non-state actors. After analyzing the missiles used by Hezbollah and the Houthis, the Missiles Defense Project at the Center for Strategic and International Studies as well as the Missile Defense Advocacy Alliance confirmed that both Hezbollah the Houthis share one common supplier of their ballistic missile stock — Iran.

The question then becomes why Iran, as a state actor, would share its ballistic technology with non-state actors. Iran has pursued two strategies through supplying non-state actors with ballistic capabilities: Lebanization and using non-state actors in interstate warfare.

### **Iran's Lebanization Strategy**

Lebanization is a strategy in which an external state capitalizes on the political turmoil that might result from a coup d'état, revolution, social unrest or civil war, as was the case in 1982 Lebanon, and sponsors a specific player who shares the same sect, ethnicity, ideology or even a political agenda. The sponsor country's primary objective would then be to provide its player with the sufficient means to at least challenge all the other players (and by default their sponsors), within

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the targeted state. As a sponsor, this strategy effectively puts your player in a solid position to be a *fait accompli* political participant in any post-turmoil arrangement. Eventually, through this player, the sponsor country can exert sustainable influence over the targeted state.

Still, providing the player with ballistic missiles seems irrelevant; after all, the player would definitely need firepower such as anti-tank guided missiles (ATGMs), assault rifles, grenades, mines,

and logistical support (ammunition, spare parts, means of communication, fuel, medical supplies) more than a delivery system such as ballistic missiles to challenge the other players in a civil war. In fact, the player would be ill-advised if he fires a ballistic missile against the other players in the targeted country as such an act could decrease popular support for the player, and people would never forgive or forget players who would use ballistic missiles against their own compatriots.

Why, then, would a sponsor provide their player with ballistic systems? As a sponsor, you might want to account for other regional sponsors who could intervene either indirectly (through sponsoring other players and preserving their deniability) or directly (through joint military operations alongside their players).

Yet, both indirect and direct intervention could drastically tilt the balance of power in a way that does not work in favor of your player. Here, the true role of ballistic missiles emerges as an efficient means for your player to directly challenge adversarial sponsors in the region by inflicting damage to their territories. It is unlikely for your player to invade the other sponsor states because non-state actors normally do not possess the sufficient military hardware required for successful invasions such as main battle tanks, armored personnel carriers, a navy and an air force. On the other hand, ballistic missiles can be enough of a nuisance to force other sponsors to accept your player as a political participant. In other words, ballistic missiles can serve as a means of intimidation to grant your player access to any political arrangements that may come about in the post-conflict phase.

The first act of Lebanization took place in Lebanon in 1985, hence the name of the phenomenon, with the creation of Hezbollah in the midst of the then-raging civil war. Iran, a state that was still living on the momentum of the Islamic Revolution, saw the turmoil in Lebanon as a chance to extend its influence over a territory upon which it had no previous leverage. As a sponsor, Iran provided its player Hezbollah with the sufficient means to overcome and dominate the south and even challenge other internal players such as the South Lebanon Army and its sponsor, Israel. A flow of arms, ammunition, logistics, and even personnel from the Iranian Revolutionary Guards flowed through Syria to help Hezbollah consolidate its growing influence in Lebanon. The first rockets Hezbollah received from Iran were the famous Soviet Katyusha rockets, which were inexpensive, usable on any chassis, easily concealed, and most importantly could be mounted on any civilian truck. This mobility enabled Hezbollah to fire a volley and quickly withdraw into an area of concealment.

These primitive Katyushas were the most advanced weaponry Iran could offer Hezbollah in the 1980s because its ballistic capabilities were limited to older versions of Soviet-made Scuds, Frogs, and SS-21 Scarabs which were desperately needed in the war against Iraq. Still, the conventional capabilities delivered at that time were sufficient for Hezbollah to dominate the south. Israel perceived an unchecked player with rocket artillery capabilities on its northern borders as a considerable threat, especially after Hezbollah refused to abide by the 1989 Taif Agreement to disarm after the end of the Lebanese Civil War. Israel launched Operation Accountability in 1993 and Operation Grapes of Wrath in 1996 to neutralize Hezbollah's threat. Yet, due to the international community's intervention, Israel was unable to fulfill its strategic objectives. After the two operations, Iran realized how vulnerable its player truly was in terms of its ability to inflict damage on Israel and began to boost Hezbollah's retaliatory capabilities to increase its survivability.

In the 2006 Lebanon War, Hezbollah started using more efficient rocket artillery

systems such as the M-302 A/B and the Iranian MLRS Fajr-3, which provided the organization with greater firepower and range than the Katyushas used earlier. Two incidents during the 2006 war illustrate the effectiveness of this strategy. The first was the firing of a C-802 (Iranian Variant: Noor) anti-ship cruise missile (provided by Iran) at an Israeli Sa'ar-5 Corvette or a small warship (INS Hanit). The missile caused significant damage to the corvette's propulsion system as well as its helicopter deck, forcing Israel to pull the corvette back to dry dock. The use of the C-802 alerted Israel that Hezbollah's threat was strategic rather than tactical. Why? Because Israel realized its perception of Hezbollah as a poorly armed terrorist organization was flawed, and that it should consider the group a threat similar to one posed by a regular military.

The second incident was Hezbollah chief Hassan Nasrallah's threat to target Tel Aviv toward the end of the war. This threat revealed that Hezbollah had procured by that time a system whose range was at least one hundred kilometers. It is believed that this threat was a message to Israel that Hezbollah had procured the Zelzal 1/2, which some still classify as a short-range ballistic missile despite its military classification as an artillery rocket system.

Thus, Nassrallah's threat to strike Tel Aviv also served the strategic purpose of forcing Israel to reassess Hezbollah's capabilities. Furthermore, the threat to strike a key Israeli city increased Hezbollah's popularity in Lebanon as the only Lebanese militant actor capable of striking its adversary's main population centers. Israel was not the only party to reassess its threat perceptions; Iran realized that the survival of its player, and by extension its influence in Lebanon, now depended on providing a more lethal and accurate means of retaliation. Hezbollah received far more lethal systems that included the GPS-guided M-600 also known as Fateh-110 (surface-to-surface missile) with an approximate range of 250 kilometers, and some reports suggest that Hezbollah also received Scud B/C systems that could deliver a 500 kilogram payload with a range that varies between 300 to 550 kilometers. It is also important to mention that the optimal purpose of deploying these systems with Hezbollah was not to defeat Israel militarily. Hezbollah does not have sufficient military capabilities, even with its new ballistic hardware, to defeat a regular army, especially one as well organized as the Israeli military. However, these ballistic capabilities have succeeded in at least deterring further Israeli attacks on Hezbollah; as a result, the missiles have become a means to ensure Hezbollah's survival in Lebanon and, by extension, Iran's continued influence there.

Once again, Iran's successful Lebanization strategy of creating and maintaining an unchallenged player in Lebanon was replicated in the Yemeni Civil War. Once again, Iran decided to sponsor a player, this time the Houthis, who share a similar political agenda and branch of Islam. In seeking to enhance its influence, Iran employed a strategy aimed at ensuring the survival of the Houthis against

other Yemeni players such as President Mansour Hadi's military (backed by Saudi Arabia) and the Southern Transitional Council (backed by the UAE), and regional sponsors represented in the Saudi-led Arab Coalition.

To counter the other domestic factions allied against its player, Iran provided the Houthis with personnel from the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) Quds Force as well as small arms, anti-tank guided missiles (ATGMs), and even air defense systems.

Yet, to counter regional sponsors, Saudi Arabia and the UAE, Iran provided the Houthis with unmanned drones (UAVs) and ballistic missile systems including the military personnel who could operate this advanced weaponry because the Houthis had no ballistic experience or expertise prior to the civil war in Yemen. The Houthi movement has continuously claimed that the ballistic missiles used against other sponsors, in this case Saudi Arabia, are indigenous systems. Prior to the war, Yemen indeed had a ballistic inventory which included Soviet and North Korean-made Scuds and a number of SS-21 Scarabs, yet most of these were destroyed by Saudi-led coalition aerial bombardment. The missiles which survived the attacks were later deployed by the Houthis against Saudi Arabia. However, Yemen had no indigenous ballistic missile program, which would have required years of expertise and testing, and above all financial resources (which are definitely scarce at times of civil war) to produce an indigenous missile.

Furthermore, the similarity between Houthi and Iranian ballistic missiles is indicative of who is really supplying the Houthis. The Houthis initially introduced their Qaher1/2 surface-to-surface missile as a product of their indigenous missile program. It was later discovered that the Qaher 1/2 is a former Yemeni S-75 Dvina (a Soviet-made high-altitude surface-to-air missile) that was transformed into a surface-to-surface missile using the same technology that Iran used to convert its S-75 Dvina (CSS-8) to the Iranian surface-to-surface Tondar-69.

In fact, most, if not all of the Houthi ballistic missiles have their Iranian identical equivalent: the Houthi unguided artillery rocket Zelzal 3 is identical to the Iranian Zelzal 3; the Houthi anti-ship cruise missile Mandab 1 is identical to the Iranian Noor; the Houthi GPS-guided Badr 1 surface-to-surface rocket is identical to the Iranian Fateh 110 Rocket; the Houthi Burkan 1 short range ballistic missile is identical to the Iranian Shehab 1 missile; the Houthi Burkan 2/2H short range ballistic missile is identical to the Iranian Qiam 1; and even the Houthi-celebrated kamikaze UAV Qasif 1 is identical to the Iranian UAV Ababil.

Why would Iran supply these systems to the Houthis? As in the Israel versus Hezbollah scenario, the Saudi military is a well-equipped force using some

of the most advanced Western-made weapons systems, while the Houthis lack the minimal means necessary to launch an invasion against Saudi Arabia.

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Ballistic missiles provide the Houthis with power, but power is not just defined in military terms; it has political dimensions which could influence the ability to conduct a favorable negotiation. Targeting Saudi Arabia with ballistic missiles puts the Houthis in an excellent position to negotiate not firing these systems. These negotiations form the core goal of the Houthi ballistic strategy—to ensure the group’s status as a political participant in post-war Yemen and, by extension, maintain sustainable Iranian influence over the country.

Some might confuse proxy warfare with the concept of Lebanization. Both terms imply the use of non-state actors as proxies or players who act on behalf of another dominant actor. But the two terms are also distinctly different. The proxy warfare environment is characterized by a hierarchical relationship between a dominant agent and a proxy where the latter is unquestionably obeying the orders of the former. However, this relationship is subject to change or termination if the proxy accomplished the main goals that brought it in line with the dominant actor, or if the proxy grows strong enough to stand on its own.

In Lebanization, the relationship between sponsor and player is equitable; the player has the liberty to unilaterally act with or without prior coordination or consultation with the sponsor. The relationship between sponsor and player is also not restricted to a power relation or timely objectives, but rather based on serving common goals. This takes us to the second neo-ballistic strategic outcome—using non-state actors in interstate warfare.

### **Using Non-State Actors in Interstate Warfare**

Classic U.S. military strategy in the Middle East has been coalition building, which is dependent on bringing together as many state actors as possible against a targeted state. Simultaneously this targeted state is isolated through sanctioning, thus weakening it over time. However, after almost forty years of sanctions, Iran has adapted to survive by (among other measures) replicating the U.S. coalition-building strategy, yet this time by connecting itself to non-state actors.

Iran has realized the leveraged power of connecting itself to non-state actors as a substitute for the state-to-state relation. It has established itself in Lebanon through Hezbollah, in Yemen through the Houthis, in Gaza through Hamas, and in Iraq through the Popular Mobilization Units and Iraqi Hezbollah by

capitalizing on the power vacuum in these states in favor of its interests.

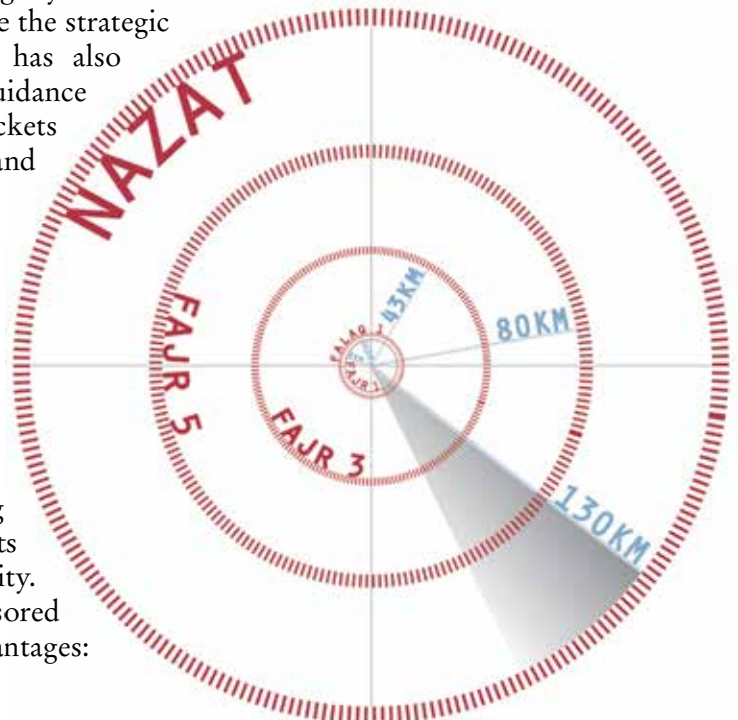
This network has compensated to a certain extent Iran's strategic isolation in the region. As discussed above, Iran has provided its network of non-state actors with ballistic missile capabilities, but the question is how do these tactics fit into Iran's overall regional strategy. A straightforward answer is provided by Iranian officials who have stated their intentions to use their network of non-state actors or "the axis of resistance" for deterrence purposes. In other words, this network will be used as a launch platform to target U.S. and Israeli interests in case either of those countries resorts to military confrontation with the Islamic Republic. However, providing these non-state actors with ballistic systems has also served Iran's strategy to counter the United States and its regional rivals in other ways that are far more important. These include:

*Increasing the utility of Iran's short-range rockets and missiles*

If Iran is to fire a missile/rocket from an Iranian coastal location against Saudi Arabia or other southern Gulf states, this system's range would have to be at least 150 kilometers. This renders all Iranian missile/rocket systems with a range of less than 150 kilometers militarily obsolete except for use against an invasion force that comes within range. Furthermore, most of the Iranian missile/rocket arsenal is comprised of short-range missile/rockets such as the Fajr 1 (range: 8 kilometers), Falaq 1 (range: 10 kilometers), Fajr 3 (range: 43 kilometers), Fajr 5 (range: 80 kilometers), and Nazat (range: 130 kilometers). Consequently, Iran needs to deploy these short-range systems closer to the targeted states to increase the strategic value of these systems. Iran has also been keen on improving the guidance systems of these missiles/rockets to increase their efficiency and lethality.

*Inflicting damage while maintaining deniability*

Iran will risk direct confrontation with other regional powers only as a last resort because it suffered dearly from such experiences during the Iran-Iraq War, and due to its conventional military inferiority. Alternatively, using a sponsored player gives Iran three advantages:





it can inflict damage on a targeted state, preserve a state of deniability after inflicting damage, and reduce the risk of retaliation on its own soil.

### *Increasing the IRGC's combat experience*

There is a difference between military training and combat experience. The former includes learning from the experience of others, as well as exercising in a safe environment, whereas the latter involves lessons no training can teach such as situation awareness and the chaos quite often found in the battlefield. In the latter, the enemy is not as passive.

The full duress of warfare and combat stress experienced by the IRGC in Iraq, Yemen, Syria, and Lebanon has increased their knowledge of war, including their ability to launch ballistic missiles while under attack. After all, combat-tested personnel will be extremely valuable if Iran ever needs to defend its mainland against an invasion.

### *Real-time testing of ballistic missile systems*

Testing new missile systems at home usually produces an exaggerated image of success, especially when the test is witnessed by the political leadership. This can lead to a strategic miscalculation of self-capabilities, hence the need for real-time testing. Operating these systems against a targeted state provides Tehran with more accurate data to evaluate the damage (lethality of the payload) and accuracy (quality of the guidance set) for each system. Gathering this data is quite valuable for Iran to improve its ballistic systems capabilities.

### *Testing enemy countermeasures*

Any missile or rocket fired at Israel or Saudi Arabia through its sponsored players provides Iran with an opportunity to test their adversaries' countermeasures in the region. Two of the systems that Iran is keen on testing and by extension evading are the Israeli Iron Dome (air defense systems designed to intercept and destroy short-range rockets and artillery shells), and the Saudi-Operated MIM-104 Patriot PAC 2/3 (a U.S. air defense system designed to intercept enemy aircraft and ballistic missiles). Testing these countermeasures gives Iran an opportunity to analyze its performance, and seek upgrades to evade them in future confrontations.

### *Testing the retaliatory behavior of the targeted state*

Sun Tzu wrote in *The Art of War*, "If you know the enemy, and know yourself, you need not fear the result of a hundred battles." It is important for Iran to anticipate the targeted state's retaliatory behavior if attacked by a ballistic missile.

Retaliatory behavior refers to the political decisions made by the targeted state to address a ballistic missile attack; the psychological impact of the ballistic missile attacks on the public and the government; and most importantly, the military options and tactics used by the targeted state to retaliate. When a sponsored player fires a ballistic missile against a targeted state, this action gives Iran a chance to analyze the behavior of this targeted state and, by extension, puts Iran at least one step ahead of the targeted state if a full-fledged war between states should break out.

*Boosting the morale of the Iranian public*

After forty years of sanctions and isolation, Iran has suffered from strategic loneliness and a widespread sense of vulnerability. Having a network of allies, even if they are non-state actors, can be utilized by the Iranian regime to boost the morale of the public particularly if these allies are inflicting damage on Iran's regional rivals using Iranian-made ballistic missiles.

In the age of a neo-ballistic Middle East, non-state actors equipped with ballistic missile capabilities can play a strategic role in shaping the spheres of influence and the balance of power in the region. The phenomena of Lebanization and using non-state actors in interstate warfare do share a number of commonalities, yet are distinct. Lebanization as a strategy aims at increasing the survivability of a sponsored player within a targeted state during periods of political turmoil as a means of increasing the sponsor's influence. Using non-state actors in interstate warfare, however, aims at increasing and enhancing the sponsor's strategic options within the theater of operations. What is perhaps most worrying is that both strategies have contributed to the proliferation of ballistic missiles in an already unstable region. The real question is not why and how non-state actors have procured ballistic capabilities, but how to disarm them from these capabilities without setting the entire region on fire. (R)