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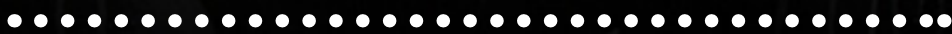


Center for Middle East Policy  
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# HEZBOLLAH

IN A TIME OF TRANSITION



DANIEL BYMAN AND BILAL Y. SAAB



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## IN A TIME OF TRANSITION



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The Arab uprisings, the authoritarian backlash, and the accompanying spate of civil wars and state breakdowns have shaken the Middle East to its core. Old alliances collapsed and new ones began. Sectarianism is now more salient than longstanding grievances like the Arab-Israeli conflict, and non-state actors like the Islamic State are shaping much of the region's agenda.

Regional tremors always shake Lebanon exceptionally hard, and the latest cataclysms are no exception. The arc of crisis stretching from Libya to Iraq is especially pronounced for the Lebanese Hezbollah, the country's most powerful, and most complex, actor. Hezbollah's position in Lebanon has long rested on several pillars: its opposition to Israel and the military prowess it has demonstrated; its ties to foreign sponsors, Iran and Syria; and its strong political and social position within Lebanon itself. This resulting mix of power, money, and performance has enabled Hezbollah to work with communities outside its Shi'ite base, become the dominant group in Lebanon, and establish itself as an important regional player.

All these are now in flux. The Syrian conflict is transforming Hezbollah. A movement that long claimed to transcend sectarianism is now the longest pole in the Syrian regime's tent, and has become a bogeyman to the region's Sunni community. At the same time, Hezbollah's deep involvement in the Syrian civil war has damaged its position in Lebanon and even led to questions within its Shi'ite base. The conflict with Israel, while still a focus of rhetoric, has faded to the background.

The question of Hezbollah's future is key for the region's stability, and for the United States and its partners. Civil war in Lebanon could reignite if sectarianism continues to grow and the Syrian war spills over in greater intensity. Hezbollah's

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role has proven vital for the survival of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's regime, and has also changed the nature of the Syrian opposition, empowering jihadists who champion sectarianism and see Hezbollah as their primary enemy. Israel has long viewed Hezbollah as its most dangerous neighbor, and diminishing Hezbollah's desire and ability to make war is imperative to the Jewish state's security. Ironically, the United States finds itself uneasily aligned with Hezbollah in the struggle against the Islamic State, but this de facto convergence could easily change.

The remainder of this essay examines how Hezbollah is navigating the Middle East's troubled waters, and the implications of its new approach. The first section assesses Hezbollah's position in Lebanon. The second section examines Hezbollah's evolving relations with Iran and Syria, as well as its broader regional position. The third section looks

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at Hezbollah's military activities and capabilities, both in Syria and with regard to a potential fight with Israel. The final section analyzes the implications of Hezbollah's increased regional role for the United States and the Middle East.

The authors are grateful for the views of international Hezbollah experts who participated in an all-day, closed conference held jointly by the Atlantic Council's Brent Scowcroft Center on International Security and Brookings's Center for Middle East Policy on September 30, 2014. Because the conference proceeded under the Chatham House rule, the participants' interventions and contributions shall remain anonymous. In any event, their participation in no way should suggest their endorsement of our views.

### Challenges in Lebanon

Hezbollah's death has been proclaimed numerous times since its inception in the early 1980s, but the Shi'ite party has survived numerous challenges: three high-intensity military conflicts with Israel in 1993, 1996, and 2006; Israel's assassination of several of its core leaders, including Sheikh Ragheb Harb in 1984, Abbas Al-Musawi in 1992, and Imad Mughniyeh in 2008;<sup>1</sup> the Syrian departure from Lebanon in 2005; a non-stop war of intelligence and counterintelligence against Israel; various political crises in Beirut; and an international tribunal investigating the February 2005 murder of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri that formally accused four Hezbollah members.

How Hezbollah has weathered all these storms can be attributed to a number of internal and external factors, including leadership, organizational coherence and discipline, political violence and tactics, superior training, and, of course, Iranian and Syrian assistance. But all this would count for little without the support Hezbollah receives from its Shi'ite constituency. Unlike many other non-state actors in the region, Hezbollah has a domestic base of support about which it cares deeply, and this concern is reciprocated. The organization has made it a top priority to cultivate good relations with the Lebanese Shi'a, knowing full well that such ties would serve as its first and last lines of defense.

However, perhaps more than at any other time in Hezbollah's history, this special bond is under pressure. By intervening in Syria to come to Assad's aid, Hassan Nasrallah, Hezbollah's Secretary General, has put his party on a collision

course with Sunnis—moderates and extremists alike—in Syria and Lebanon, and elsewhere in the region. This course of action is very risky for Hezbollah and its constituency because regional demographics have always worked against the Shi'ites. Even the staunchest Lebanese Shi'ite supporters of Hezbollah would prefer peace with their fellow Sunni Lebanese—and the region—to conflict.

Nasrallah has to wonder whether his approach to the civil war in Syria has backfired. It is not just that Sunni radicals, despite Hezbollah's military advances in Syria, have been able to penetrate deep into the Shi'ite party's sphere of influence and wreak havoc. More importantly, the same extremists who Nasrallah was hoping to fight outside Lebanon could turn Lebanon into another Iraq, a country defined by Sunni-Shi'ite sectarian violence. In this probable scenario, Hezbollah stands to lose the most, because another Lebanese civil war would be a major distraction from the military struggle against Israel.

But the apparent tensions within Hezbollah's camp should not be exaggerated. Shi'a sentiment in Lebanon is still pro-Hezbollah, though some in the community are questioning why the group is risking everything by siding with an unstable and murderous Syrian regime. It would take a long time for increased Shi'ite dissent and dissatisfaction to shake Hezbollah's grip on the community. After all, Hezbollah has been nurturing these ties since 1982, providing the Lebanese Shi'a with social goods, a political voice, security, and a sense of empowerment. Nor is there a strong rival movement. Perhaps most important, the slaughter of minorities by the Islamic State and its bloodthirsty anti-Shi'ite rhetoric create a sense that Hezbollah had no choice but to aid Assad – that it was a case of kill or be killed. It is not that Hezbollah is getting more popular; it is that the Lebanese Shi'a and other communities are getting more desperate. But with every bomb that goes off in its stronghold—and with every loss of Shi'a life that is not caused by Israel—the group's control of its support base could wane.

Hezbollah's relations with the Shi'ite Amal and the Christian Free Patriotic Movement (FPM) could suffer as a result of worsening security conditions in Syria and Lebanon, and the potential collapse of the Syrian regime. It is more likely that Amal would stand by Hezbollah given the absence of a real security alternative, but the FPM might reconsider its alliance with the Shi'ite party given their dissimilar values and belief systems. However,

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<sup>1</sup> Perhaps not coincidentally, these three individuals were all killed during February.

it is also possible that many Christians, including FPM supporters, might strengthen their relations with Hezbollah because they see it as a credible protector against Sunni extremists—if not the only one, given the relative weakness of the Lebanese army. Unless he is offered major political and security incentives by Saudi Arabia and other Arab Gulf states, it is hard to see FPM leader Michel Aoun breaking ranks with Hezbollah at a time of need and insecurity.

All of this assumes that a gradual or complete demise of Assad is inevitable, which it is not—indeed, his regime is likely to survive. Although Assad might not be able to govern all of Syria, his control of major cities, including his regime's base in Damascus, is growing. An indefinite stalemate is costly for Hezbollah because it doesn't solve the problem of Syrian spillover, it prolongs political tensions in Beirut, and it keeps Lebanon and Hezbollah's Shi'a supporters at risk of attack by Sunni extremists—but it also doesn't force Hezbollah and Iran to make drastic decisions and tough compromises.

### An Expanded Regional Role?

Without the continuous support of Iran and Syria, Hezbollah would not have been able to dominate Lebanese politics, build a state within a state, and become a formidable regional force. But the same ties that have transformed Hezbollah and increased its powers over the years have also brought significant costs to the organization in terms of lives, resources, reputation, and political standing both in Lebanon and the region. Hezbollah's military intervention in Syria is a clear example of how the group's strategic links to Damascus and Tehran, which have served it so well over the years, can also be a great burden.

The Syrian conflict presents Hezbollah with the biggest challenge it has faced since it was born. Hezbollah initially called for a peaceful resolution of the crisis, but as the popular struggle militarized and radical elements entered the fray—partly as a result of Assad's brutal tactics—the group could not afford to be a bystander. If Assad's regime falls, Hezbollah would lose a key supporter from a country that historically has played a dominant role in Lebanese politics. Even more important, Syria is Iran's closest ally, and Tehran was calling in its chips by asking Hezbollah and other supporters to close ranks around the Assad regime.

Should Syria fall, Hezbollah is likely to lose a transit route and storage facility for weapons from Iran

and Syria. In anticipation of any collapse of the Syrian regime, or rapid deterioration of security conditions in Syria, Hezbollah has reportedly moved hundreds of missiles from storage sites in Syria to bases in eastern Lebanon. The potential loss of its logistics hub and supply line in Syria would place Hezbollah at a significant disadvantage in the event of another conflict with Israel. In the 2006 conflict with Israel, the group benefited from the strategic transit route through Syria, which allowed Hezbollah to quickly replenish its weapons supplies; therefore, the loss of Syrian support could cause Hezbollah to hold onto its larger, strategic weapons if they cannot be easily acquired and replaced. Unless Hezbollah and Iran can build a similar capability in another location, Hezbollah will likely face challenges resupplying its rockets and missiles in the near term.

But should Assad leave—or even should his jihadist opponents grow stronger, as is currently happening—the gravest threat Hezbollah (and Lebanon as a whole) would have to imminently deal with is Sunni extremism. Sunni radicals would not settle for controlling Syria, but would also seek to expand into Lebanon (and possibly Jordan) to fulfill their ideological goals and go after Hezbollah and its Shi'ite supporters. Over the past year, Sunni jihadists have attacked Shi'ite interests in Lebanon on multiple occasions<sup>2</sup> (the bombing of the Iranian embassy on November 19, 2013, was the deadliest and most spectacular, killing twenty-three people and injuring dozens more). Hezbollah, with the help of the Lebanese army, has shown resiliency and has currently managed to contain the threat by battling with Sunni militants across the Syrian-Lebanese borders and in various areas in Lebanon's northern region, and forcing many of them to retreat into Syria. But the fight is anything but over.

Hezbollah is not oblivious to the risks and costs of its military intervention in Syria. Its leadership has calculated that, so long as the balance of

2 The following is a list of the major attacks allegedly perpetrated by Sunni extremists against Shi'ite interests in Hizballah strongholds in Lebanon:

- August 15, 2013 - [Roueiss bombing](#) - 27 killed, 336 wounded - claimed by "external operations" arm of Battalions of Aisha Um al-Mumineen
- November 19, 2013 - [Iranian Embassy bombing in Bir Hassan](#) - 23 killed - claimed by Abdullah Azzam Brigades (al-Qaeda linked)
- January 2, 2014 - [Haret Hreik bombing](#) - 6 killed, 66 wounded (unclear who was behind the attack)
- January 21, 2014 - [Second Haret Hreik bombing](#) - 4 killed, 46 wounded - claimed by Jabhat al Nusra
- February 19, 2014 - [Twin blasts in south Beirut near Iranian cultural center](#) - 5 killed - claimed by Abdullah Azzam Brigades
- September 20, 2014 - [Bombing at Hizballah checkpoint in Khreibeh](#) - at least 3 killed

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power tilts in favor of Assad's forces and the Syria-Lebanon border is largely secure, the costs of siding with Syria are tolerable. However, if the situation drastically worsens in Syria, with opposition groups becoming better armed and organized, and Assad's international allies—primarily Iran and Russia—distancing themselves from Damascus, the costs of supporting what could be a falling regime will be much higher for Hezbollah. Therefore, it is possible the group will revisit its policy to defend its core interests—protecting its arms supplies, maintaining its military deterrent posture vis-à-vis Israel, and aiding Iran should it come under attack.

Assad's fate notwithstanding, Hezbollah's ties to Iran will likely remain intact, though the relationship will have to adapt to its changing environment. Unlike its pragmatic relationship with Syria, Hezbollah's organic partnership with Iran is based on deep trust and shared interests. Hezbollah looks for ideological and strategic guidance from Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, who instructs his regime's intelligence institutions and elite military units to work closely with Hezbollah. Hezbollah has acquired more autonomy from Iran since the 1980s, and may currently be considered more of a partner than a surrogate, but the group still relies on Iranian training, weapons, and funding. While the overall numbers are unknown, the group likely receives anywhere between \$100 million and \$200 million annually from Iran—and this number often goes up in times of need. The shared interest of these two actors ensures that this relationship will survive in some form, regardless of the outcome of events in Syria.

However, how the Iranian regime responds to the potential collapse of its Syrian ally will directly affect Hezbollah's future. Iran could instruct Hezbollah to continue the fight in Syria to try to maintain supply routes and create new allies. Hezbollah could also see itself assume a greater regional role in the service of Iranian interests, to compensate for the loss of Syria (Iraq is one obvious place where it might act given Hezbollah's longstanding links to Shi'a groups there and Iran's strong interests in Iraq). But all of this would come at the high risk of overstretch, which could severely weaken Hezbollah at home. Not only would Hezbollah have to protect itself against a much more hostile environment in Syria, but it would also need to potentially guard against opportunistic local political actors who could exploit its relative weakness. While Hezbollah offers many benefits to Iran, including loyalty to its revolutionary ideology and projection of Shi'ite power in Arab lands, its

biggest value is its military arsenal, which could be used in the event that Israel launches a war against Iran.

### Evolving Military Power and Strategy

Hezbollah made war and war made Hezbollah. In conflict after conflict, the organization has proven its prowess and shown itself a notch above other Middle Eastern militant groups—and even Arab state militaries. From 1985 to 2000, Hezbollah forces battled Israel in the security zone along the Israeli border, inflicting a steady stream of casualties that eventually led Israel to withdraw, marking the first time Arab arms defeated Israeli arms. Hezbollah has also launched rockets at Israel, and as the range of its weapons systems expanded, so did the concern of Israeli leaders. In 2006, Israel and Hezbollah fought for more than a month, with Hezbollah killing more than one hundred and sixty Israelis—heavy losses for the small and casualty-sensitive Jewish state. During the fight, Hezbollah demonstrated its military strength, ambushing Israeli armored forces and maintaining a rocket barrage in the face of Israeli air strikes and ground incursion. As one Israeli officer noted, “[Hezbollah's forces] are a mini-Israeli army. They can do everything as well as we can.”<sup>3</sup> Hezbollah's population surged in the aftermath of that war, with its leader, Hassan Nasrallah, briefly becoming the most admired man in the Arab world.

After the 2006 war and until the outbreak of the Syrian conflict, Hezbollah focused militarily on Israel, as both sides feared another war would break out. Iran helped rearm Hezbollah, making it even more formidable than before and replenishing (and improving) its rocket arsenals. Hezbollah training camps have models of Israeli streets and the organization otherwise prepares its forces for taking on Israel. Hezbollah maintains a vast network of tunnels to hide its forces and rocket launchers as well as secure communications, all in preparation for an Israeli strike. Hezbollah has roughly twenty thousand men under arms, of which five thousand are elite fighters. Hezbollah can call on thousands more in a pinch; it has deliberately kept the size of its forces limited to ensure a high level of training and commitment.

Hezbollah began to intervene militarily in Syria in 2012. This was limited at first, but the growing desperation of the Assad regime forced Hezbollah

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<sup>3</sup> As quoted in Clive Jones, “Israeli Counter-Insurgency Strategy and the War in South Lebanon,” *Small Wars and Insurgencies*, Vol. 8, no. 3, p. 92.

to step up its involvement and justify its role. The Shi'ite group has sustained heavy losses, with perhaps seven hundred dead and many more wounded, and veteran commanders counted among the casualties.

Roughly five thousand Hezbollah soldiers fight at a time, but the organization regularly rotates its forces to spread the burden evenly. Nevertheless, to keep its numbers up, Hezbollah deploys younger recruits who are less trained. Hezbollah has also changed its tactics. In battles in and around the Syrian town of Qusair in 2013, Hezbollah took heavy casualties as its forces directly assaulted dug-in Syrian rebel positions. In subsequent operations in the Qalamoun mountain area, however, Hezbollah forces slowly advanced and even let some rebels escape, in order to minimize further casualties.

For Hezbollah, the military challenge in Syria is also more daunting than in the Lebanese theater. In contrast to southern Lebanon, Hezbollah forces do not have an intimate knowledge of the Syrian terrain. In addition, they must cooperate with irregular and regular Syrian forces and Iraqi militias, rather than just rely on their own fighters. Hezbollah frequently operates at the company and even battalion level in Syria, using far larger formations than it usually has had in Lebanon when it waged guerilla war against Israel. As Islamic State fighters advanced in Iraq, many of the Iraqi Shi'ite militias aiding the Assad regime went home to fight, increasing the burden on Hezbollah.

Because of its heavy role in Syria, Hezbollah is more militarily invested in Iran than ever before. In Syria, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps' Quds Force assisted Hezbollah with command and control and training. Entering the war was in part "payback" for past favors—but by doing so, Hezbollah tied itself even more tightly to its Iranian master.

Finally, Hezbollah also believes it has a military role in Lebanon. Along the border, its forces are patrolling and even laying mines in order to prevent infiltration. Hezbollah coordinates quietly with the Lebanese Armed Forces, which dare not confront the Shi'ite group.

### Implications for Lebanon, Israel, and the United States

It is not likely that the March 14 coalition (a political grouping of anti-Syrian factions in Lebanon) or other pro-Western voices in Lebanon will gain from Hezbollah's travails. They are divided within, and

have shown themselves unable to sustain mass support. Rather, it is militia leaders and extremists who are likely to grow more powerful. The more than 1.2 million Syrian refugees in Lebanon—a little more than a quarter of the total population—are a wild card. They might become radicalized, and their camps could become a sanctuary for fighters in Syria. It is even possible that, over time, they might become a violent player in Lebanon's politics itself, as the Palestinians did before them. This is a particular concern for Hezbollah, as the majority of the refugees in Lebanon are Sunni Muslims who see Hezbollah as the friend of their enemy.

Hezbollah is both battle weary and battle hardened. The Syria experience has blooded its forces, making them more skilled and allowing Hezbollah to test its commanders. At the same time, the heavy death toll and the constant strain are overwhelming, and Hezbollah cannot easily take on a new foe. The fighting in Syria is also different from fighting Israel. Hezbollah is in essence a counterinsurgency force, taking on less-organized, poorly trained, and lightly armed rebels. The IDF is a different, and far more dangerous, kettle of fish.

As a result, Hezbollah's military threat to Israel is uncertain. Despite the drain of the Syrian conflict, parts of Hezbollah still focus on rockets and other means of striking Israel. Indeed, Hezbollah has warned that, should there be another conflict, it might adjust its military strategy and conduct cross-border operations. The growing range of Hezbollah's rockets puts all of Israel in danger, though the relative success of the Israeli missile defense systems offers Israelis some comfort. Nevertheless, Hezbollah is in no mood for a clash with Israel. The border with Israel has been quiet since 2006, and the drain of the Syrian conflict makes Hezbollah even more cautious.

Israel, for its part, is trying to walk a fine line. On the one hand, it wants to prevent transfers of Syrian and Iranian arms to Hezbollah, particularly for systems like surface-to-air missiles, anti-ship cruise missiles, or even chemical weapons that might significantly increase the threat to Israel. To that end, it has at times attacked Hezbollah forces transferring weapons, leading Hezbollah to conduct limited attacks on the Golan Heights in response, using Syrian territory as a base. On the other hand, Israel has no appetite for a broader clash. Too many strikes on Hezbollah, or forcing Hezbollah into a position where its political standing depends on a fight with Israel, would be a self-defeating action for Israel, bringing on the war it hopes to deter.

Nevertheless, conflict might still break out: few predicted the 2006 war, for example. Given that Israel regularly hits Hezbollah weapons shipments, the chances of escalation remain considerable. Israel might miscalculate about whether a particular strike would result in escalation, while Hezbollah might think a limited response would not lead Israel to up the ante. Much would depend on the domestic political position of both the Israeli government and of Hezbollah, and neither one has shown much aptitude for understanding the other's politics. In addition, Hezbollah has positioned its forces to help Iran deter Israel. Should there be a military strike on an Iranian nuclear facility, or should Iran otherwise become embroiled in a conflict involving Israel, Hezbollah is prepared to act.

There is no end in sight to the conflict in Syria, and the growing sectarianism and the risk of violence in Lebanon will put Syrian jihadists—not America or Israel—at the center of Hezbollah's radar, regardless of its rhetoric. The military drain of keeping thousands of fighters in supply and well-trained will crowd out other organizational priorities, and Hezbollah will be perceived as even more of a sectarian actor in Lebanon. Hezbollah will have to rely more on rockets and para-military activities as an asymmetric response.

Hezbollah also maintains its capacity for international terrorism. In recent years, Hezbollah has used this tactic to respond to what it sees as Israeli aggression against itself or against Iran. For example, Hezbollah allegedly struck Israel and Jewish facilities in Argentina in the 1990s, in response to what it considered Israeli escalation in the border war in Lebanon. Hezbollah also is believed to have attempted several international terrorist attacks against Israeli targets after Israel

allegedly killed Imad Mughniyeh, the Shi'ite party's most senior military commander and head of external operations.

Despite Hezbollah's role in terrorism and anti-American rhetoric, the organization shares many interests with the United States—though both sides would be loath to admit it. Both actors are at war with the Islamic State and other Sunni extremists, and both want to prop up Iraqi Prime Minister Haidar Abadi's government in Baghdad. Even within Lebanon, while Washington supports Hezbollah's political rivals in the anti-Syrian March 14 coalition, it recognizes that Hezbollah is helping hold the country together, and that either an Islamic State expansion or a descent into chaos would be worse than the status quo.

Open cooperation, however, is politically out of the question for both parties. Indeed, a slight shift could turn suspicion into conflict. The US campaign in Syria is focused on Sunni extremists, and thus is indirectly helping the Assad regime, Hezbollah's ally. Yet, if Washington decides to live up to its anti-Assad rhetoric and take on the Syrian regime as well as Sunni jihadists, it will also be taking on Hezbollah. Hezbollah's hostility to Israel remains strong, another point of friction. In addition, Hezbollah is more in bed with Iran now than ever before, and any military action against Tehran over its nuclear program or other issues must seriously factor in Hezbollah's response.

Hezbollah remains a key regional player. It is also a stalking horse for Iran and a prop to the Syrian regime. Nevertheless, the organization is also overtaxed militarily and on the defensive politically. The United States must recognize this mix of strength and weakness if its regional policies are to meet with success.

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