

Hezbollah's Syrian Quagmire

BY MATTHEW LEVITT

Hezbollah – Lebanon's Party of God – is many things. It is one of the dominant political parties in Lebanon, as well as a social and religious movement catering first and foremost (though not exclusively) to Lebanon's Shi'a community. Hezbollah is also Lebanon's largest militia, the only one to maintain its weapons and rebrand its armed elements as an "Islamic resistance" in response to the terms of the Taif Accord, which ended Lebanon's civil war and called for all militias to disarm.¹ While the various wings of the group are intended to complement one another, the reality is often messier. In part, that has to do with compartmentalization of the group's covert activities. But it is also a factor of the group's multiple identities – Lebanese, pan-Shi'a, pro-Iranian – and the group's multiple and sometimes competing goals tied to these different identities. Hezbollah insists that it is Lebanese first, but in fact, it is an organization that always acts out of its self-interests above its purported Lebanese interests. According to the U.S. Treasury Department, Hezbollah also has an "expansive global network" that "is sending money and operatives to carry out terrorist attacks around the world."²

Over the past few years, a series of events has exposed some of Hezbollah's covert and militant enterprises in the region and around the world, challenging the group's standing at home and abroad. Hezbollah operatives have been indicted for the murder of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri by the UN Special Tribunal for Lebanon (STL) in The Hague,³ arrested on charges of plotting attacks in Nigeria,⁴ and convicted on similar charges in Thailand and Cyprus.⁵ Hezbollah's criminal enterprises, including drug running and money laundering from South America to Africa to the Middle East, have been targeted by law enforcement and regulatory agencies. And shortly after the European Union blacklisted the military wing of Hezbollah, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) followed suit, banning the provision of financial or other support for the group from GCC countries, and began deporting suspected Hezbollah supporters.⁶

But all this pales in comparison to the existential challenges Hezbollah faces over its active participation in the war in Syria. By siding with the Assad regime, the regime's Alawite supporters, and Iran, and taking up arms against Sunni rebels, Hezbollah has placed itself at the epicenter of

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a sectarian conflict that has nothing to do with the group's purported *raison d'être*: "resistance" to Israeli occupation. After Hezbollah Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah gave a speech in August 2013, defending the group's activities in Syria as part of its "resistance" against Israel, one Shiite Lebanese satirist commented that, "Either the fighters have lost Palestine on the map and think it is in Syria (or) they were informed that the road to Jerusalem runs through Qusayr and Homs," locations in Syria where Hezbollah has fought with Assad loyalists against Sunni rebels.⁷ Now, in 2014, with Hezbollah's credibility as a resistance group on the line, the group's activities in Syria place it at odds with the majority of Sunni Palestinians, especially those in Lebanon and Syria where the conflict is felt most acutely. Indeed, in January 2014 Hamas leaders stepped in and pleaded with Hezbollah and Iran for humanitarian relief on behalf of the besieged and starving Palestinian population of the Yarmouk refugee camp near Damascus.⁸

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While most Palestinian factions are trying to maintain an official policy of disassociation from the crisis in Syria, that is becoming an increasingly difficult position to hold. Already, some Palestinian Islamist factions openly criticize Hezbollah for its involvement in the war

supporting Assad. There have been incidents of Sidon-based members of the Hezbollah-affiliated Resistance Brigades attacking residents of the city.⁹ In December, two Fatah members of the Ain al-Hilweh Palestinian camp on the outskirts of Sidon were shot at by masked gunman, killing one and injuring the other.¹⁰ The camp now hosts an additional 10,000 Palestinian refugees from Syria who fled the Yarmouk camp on the outskirts of Damascus. The camp has an official disassociation policy, but it also has posters of men killed while fighting with rebels against Assad in Syria. One of the suicide bombers in the November 19th attack on the Iranian embassy was also a resident, and it is also believed to have been the residence of the mastermind behind that attack, Majid al-Majid.¹¹ Alarmed by these events, Hezbollah officially dissolved the group.¹² More alarming still, these same Palestinian Islamist factions have warned security officials that they "would not stand by idly in the event that Hezbollah gunmen attack their rivals in Sidon."¹³

Hezbollah in Syria

Speaking in late May, Hezbollah Secretary General Nasrallah declared that the battle in Syria was Hezbollah's fight: "We will continue along the road, bear the responsibilities and the sacrifices. This battle is ours, and I promise you victory."¹⁴ To that end, Hezbollah went "all-in" fighting alongside Assad regime loyalists and Iranian Revolutionary Guardsmen against Syrian rebels. The impact of Hezbollah's involvement cannot be overstated, as was seen most clearly in the battle for Qusayr, where Hezbollah gunmen reportedly fought house to house, took significant losses, and played the decisive role in turning the tide against the rebels who ultimately lost the

battle. That battle also laid bare the myth that Hezbollah was not fighting in Syria.

Although Hezbollah had already admitted it was fighting in Syria, it insisted that it was only either fighting along the border to protect ethnic Lebanese living on the Syrian side of the border, or protecting Shi'a shrines, specifically the Sayyeda Zeinab shrine in Damascus. These narratives used by Hezbollah and its allies in Iran and Iraq have pervaded their propaganda in the past two years.¹⁵

While the Sayyeda Zeinab shrine is indeed a major Shi'a pilgrimage site, Hezbollah has more than just spiritual ties to the shrine. As early as the 1980s, Hezbollah used the shrine as a place at which to spot potential Shi'a recruits. For Saudi Shi'a recruits in particular, the Sayyeda Zeinab shrine served as a transfer hub and as a cover for travel between Saudi Arabia and training camps in Lebanon and/or Iran.¹⁶

Hard evidence of the Sayyeda Zeinab's operational significance for Hezbollah came to light in the context of the FBI investigation into the 1996 Khobar Towers bombing which killed 19 U.S. Air Force personnel and wounded another 372 Americans. Several Saudi civilians in a nearby park were also killed in the explosion, while the wounded included citizens of Saudi Arabia, Bangladesh, Egypt, Jordan, Indonesia, and the Philippines.

Five of the Khobar Towers conspirators were recruited in Damascus, according to the findings of U.S. investigators, most at the Sayyeda Zeinab shrine. When Abdallah al-Jarash was recruited there, he was told the goal of this Saudi Hezbollah group was "to target foreign interests, American in particular, in Saudi Arabia and elsewhere."¹⁷ Later, at least one of the operatives recruited at the Damascus

shrine, Ali al-Marhoum, would return to Saudi Arabia and recruit more operatives there.¹⁸

Just days before the bombing, several of the conspirators met in Damascus at the Sayyeda Zeinab shrine to confer one last time with senior leadership of Saudi Hezbollah. Abdel Karim al-Nasser, the group's chief, reportedly went over the operational details of

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the bomb plot with his operatives to be sure everyone knew their roles.¹⁹

In May 2013, Nasrallah insisted Hezbollah had not intervened in the fighting in Syria until just several months earlier. While "tens of thousands of (Sunni) fighters" joined the fight in Syria, Nasrallah lamented, the international community only complained about foreign intervention in Syria when "a small group from Hezbollah entered Syria."²⁰

But Hezbollah's destabilizing activities in Syria date almost to the beginning of the country's uprising in 2011. These activities, as a journalist in Lebanon put it, have "torn away the party's mask of virtue."²¹ Within weeks of the uprising, Nasrallah himself called on all Syrians to stand by the regime.²² As reports emerged in May 2011 that Iran's Qods Force was helping the Syrian regime crack down on anti-government demonstrators, Hezbollah denied playing "any military role in Arab countries."²³ But by the following month, Syrian protesters were heard chanting not only

for Assad's downfall, but also against Iran and Hezbollah. Video footage showed protesters burning posters of Nasrallah.²⁴ According to a senior Syrian defense official who defected from the regime, Syrian security services were unable to handle the uprising on their own. "They didn't have decent snipers or equipment," he explained. "They needed qualified snipers from Hezbollah and Iran."²⁵

Over time, Hezbollah increasingly struggled to conceal its on-the-ground support of the Assad regime. In August 2012, the U.S. Treasury Department blacklisted Hezbollah, already on the Department's terrorism list, this time for providing support to the Assad regime. Since the beginning of the rebellion, Treasury explained, Hezbollah had been providing "training, advice, and extensive

logistical support to the Government of Syria's increasingly ruthless efforts" against the opposition.²⁶ Most funerals for those killed in the fighting were quiet affairs, as Hezbollah tried to keep a lid on the extent of its activities in Syria, but news began to leak. In August 2012, Hezbollah parliamentarians reportedly attended the funeral of military commander Musa Ali Shehimi, who "died while performing his jihadi duty."²⁷ A few weeks later, another Hezbollah military commander, Ali Hussein Nassif, was killed in Syria, along with two bodyguards, also "while performing his jihadi duties," according to a Hezbollah newspaper.²⁸ Hezbollah's "resistance" rhetoric notwithstanding, U.S. officials informed the UN Security Council in October 2012, "the truth is plain to see: Nasrallah's fighters are now part



Hariri memorial shrine, September 2, 2005.

of Assad's killing machine."²⁹ Two months later, a UN report confirmed Hezbollah members were in Syria fighting on behalf of the Assad government.³⁰ Amid increasing concern that the struggle in Syria would engulf the region in conflict, Hezbollah set up training camps near Syrian chemical weapons depots in November 2012.³¹ According to one senior U.S. official, "The fear these weapons could fall into the wrong hands is our greatest concern."³²

Hezbollah's Strategic Interests in Syria

By engaging in this sectarian war, Hezbollah threatens the stability of the fractured and deeply divided sectarian society that is Lebanon. Ignoring the government of Lebanon's stated policy of non-intervention in Syria, Hezbollah dragged Lebanon into a nasty sectarian war. Recognizing this, Nasrallah upset a great many of his countrymen when he suggested Lebanese could fight each other all they wanted in Syria, just not in Lebanon:

"We renew our call for sparing Lebanon any internal clash or conflict. We disagree over Syria. You fight in Syria; we fight in Syria; then let's fight there. Do you want me to be more frank? Keep Lebanon aside. Why should we fight in Lebanon? There are different viewpoints, different visions, and different evaluation of obligations. Well so far so good. However, let's spare Lebanon fighting, struggle and bloody confrontations."³³

But Hezbollah's fight has not limited itself to the Syrian side of the border. Nor will Hezbollah pull back from its support of the Assad regime. Hezbollah thinks it is in its interests to fight until victory because it sees at stake three interlocking strategic interests so

critical to the group that Nasrallah – who, according to the Treasury Department, has personally "overseen Hezbollah's efforts to help the Syrian regime's violent crackdown on the Syrian civilian population" – is willing to risk further undermining Hezbollah's standing in Lebanon and the region.³⁴

First, Hezbollah seeks to keep Assad in power for its own interests. For years Syria has been a reliable patron of Hezbollah's, a relationship that only grew deeper under the rule of Bashar al-Assad.³⁵ While Hafez al-Assad used Hezbollah as a proxy, he also kept the group at arm's length and at times used force to keep the group in line. In 1988, Syria issued a warrant for the arrest of Imad Mughniyeh, the head of Hezbollah's Islamic Jihad Organization.³⁶ By 2010, Syria was not just allowing the trans-shipment of Iranian arms to Hezbollah through Syria, but was reportedly providing Hezbollah long range Scud rockets from its own arsenal.³⁷ Nasrallah explained the nature of Hezbollah's alliance with Syria very clearly:

"I frankly say that Syria is the backbone of the resistance, and the support of the resistance. The resistance cannot sit with hands crossed while its backbone is held vulnerable and its support is being broken or else we will be stupid. Stupid is he who stands motionless while watching death, the siege and conspiracy crawling towards him. He would be stupid then. However, the responsible, rational man acts with absolute responsibility."³⁸

Second, Hezbollah's support of the Assad regime is not just due to a romantic sense of obligation. Hezbollah is keen to make sure that air and land corridors remain open for the delivery of weapons, cash and other materials

from Tehran. Until the Syrian civil war, Iranian aircraft would fly into Damascus International Airport where their cargo would be loaded onto Syrian military trucks and escorted into Lebanon for delivery to Hezbollah.³⁹ Now, Hezbollah is desperate to either secure the Assad regime, its control of the airport and the roads to Lebanon or, at a minimum, establish firm Alawi control of the coastal areas so Hezbollah can receive shipments through the air and sea ports in Latakia. Over the past few years, FBI investigations into Hezbollah criminal enterprises in the United States and Europe revealed at least two cases where Hezbollah operatives planned to procure weapons – in one case MANPADs intended to take down Israeli airplanes – and ship them to Hezbollah through Latakia.⁴⁰ In another case, a European Hezbollah procurement agent told an FBI undercover agent that the weapons would be exported to Latakia, Syria, where Hezbollah controlled the port. Secrecy would be guaranteed there, he assured the undercover agent, because Hezbollah could shut down all the cameras when the shipment arrived and no shipping paperwork would be required once the items arrived in Syria.⁴¹

And third, Hezbollah is also fighting for the Assad regime in support of Iran's interests. Hezbollah's ideological commitment to Iranian Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini's revolutionary doctrine of *velayat-e faqih* (guardianship of the jurist), which holds that a Shi'a Islamic cleric should serve as the supreme head of government, is a key source of tension since it means that the group is simultaneously committed to the decrees of Iranian clerics, the Lebanese state, its sectarian Shi'a community within Lebanon, and fellow Shi'a abroad.

In February 2012, Director of National Intelligence James Clapper characterized the

relationship between Hezbollah and Iran as "a partnership arrangement... with the Iranians as the senior partner."⁴² This "strategic partnership," as the National Counterterrorism Center (NCTC) director Matthew Olsen put it, "is the product of a long evolution from the 1980s, when Hezbollah was just a proxy of Iran."⁴³ The implication is clear: Lebanon's Party of God is no longer a pure "Islamic resistance" fighting Israel, but a sectarian militia and Iranian proxy doing Bashar al-Assad and Ayatollah Ali Khamenei of Iran's bidding at the expense of fellow Muslims.

Building Proxies

To contend with the possibility that – after as many as 200,000 reported deaths in the civil war – Iran, Hezbollah, and Syria are unable to definitively defeat the rebels and pacify the Sunni majority, Hezbollah has already established local proxies through which it can maintain influence and engage in mischief to undermine stability in the country for some time to come.

Helping establish, train, and equip militias in Syria is nothing new for Hezbollah. It also took part in these activities during the Iraq war last decade in coordination with Iran's IRGC (Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps).⁴⁴ Two of these Iraqi militias – Kata'ib Hezbollah (KH) and Asa'ib Ahl al-Haqq (AAH) – are now being instrumentalized by Lebanese Hezbollah to build up auxiliary forces to assist the Assad regime.⁴⁵ The key militias fighting with and in some cases directly for Hezbollah in Syria have been the Jaysh al-Sha'abi (JS), Liwa' Abu Fadl al-Abbas (LAFA), Kata'ib Sayyid al-Shuhada (KSS), Liwa' Zulfiqar (LZ), and Liwa' 'Ammar Ibn Yasir (LAIY).⁴⁶

Jaysh al-Sha'abi (The People's Army) is a U.S. designated terrorist organization and militia force that maintains a connection to the Assad regime's military apparatus. This highlights how the regime has adapted its forces to fight an asymmetric and irregular war. According to the U.S. Treasury Department, Jaysh al-Sha'abi "was created, and continues to be maintained, with support from Iran and Hezbollah and is modeled after the Iranian *Basij* militia."⁴⁷

In contrast to JS, the other militias are not within Syria's security apparatus, but rather new independent proxies established by the IRGC and Hezbollah.⁴⁸ Most of these groups use the same type of iconography and narratives that Hezbollah has put forward as it

relates to the resistance, its "jihadi duties," and protecting Shi'a shrines. Of these four forces, Liwa' Abu Fadl al-Abbas (LAFA) is the most prominent and has been involved in the conflict since the fall of 2012. LAFA's fighters are a combination of members of Lebanese Hezbollah, Kata'ib Hezbollah and Asa'ib Ahl al-Haqq. It has mainly been operating in southern Damascus.⁴⁹

Since then, Kata'ib Sayyid al-Shuhada (KSS) and Liwa' Zulfikar (LZ) have spawned from LAFA and have proven to be key fighters in areas like southern Damascus.⁵⁰ KSS and LZ both draw fighters from Lebanese Hezbollah and Iraqi Shi'a.⁵¹ LZ is also believed to gain some fighters from Muqtada al-Sadr's Liwa'a al-Yum al-Mawud (Promised Day Brigades).⁵²



Former President of Iran, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, President of Syria, Bashar al-Assad, and leader of Hezbollah, Hassan Narsallah.

KSS was set up in mid-April 2013, while LZ was established in early June 2013.⁵³ Unlike LAFA, KSS, or LZ, Liwa' 'Ammar Ibn Yasir (LAIY) does not operate in southern Damascus around the area where the Sayyeda Zeinab shrine is located. Instead, LAIY is mainly operating in rural Aleppo, even farther north than Lebanese Hezbollah's operations in Qusayr and Homs.⁵⁴ LAIY first began operating in May

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2013 and has been involved with some fighting, though only less than ten fighters have been reported killed.⁵⁵

Although Lebanese Hezbollah and the IRGC have built up these auxiliary forces, Lebanese Hezbollah has itself also been engaged in fighting against Syrian rebel forces.

Hezbollah's Spring Offensive

In the Spring of 2013, Hezbollah took on a more public presence in the fight against the Syrian rebels when martyrdom notices for fallen Hezbollah fighters began to appear on the group's official and unofficial websites, forums, and Facebook pages.⁵⁶ Based on Hezbollah's organization structure and disciplined messaging, it is likely these notices were sanctioned by the leadership in the organization despite the fact that they did not publicly admit to being involved in Syria until late May. Determining the number of fighters Hezbollah

has sent to Syria is difficult to ascertain, but according to French intelligence sources its believed that 3,000-4,000 individuals have made the trip to assist the Assad regime.⁵⁷ The numbers may be slightly higher according to other sources, in the range of 4,000-5,000 fighters on the ground in Syria at a time and rotating in and out of the country on thirty day deployments.⁵⁸

Hezbollah has proven to be an invaluable fighting force for Iran and the Assad regime. Within a few weeks of Nasrallah's public proclamation that Hezbollah had entered the conflict, Hezbollah retook the strategic city of Qusayr for the regime, a significant defeat for Syrian rebels. Hezbollah is believed to have suffered significant losses in that battle, losing as many as a few hundred men.⁵⁹ Still, despite the high cost, the battle vindicated Nasrallah's pledge just a few weeks prior: "I say to all the honorable people, to the mujahedeen, to the heroes: I have always promised you a victory and now I pledge to you a new one in Syria."⁶⁰

In Hezbollah propaganda, the battle of Qusayr was portrayed as no less a victory than the Israeli withdrawal from Lebanon in 2000 and Hezbollah's self-proclaimed "divine victory" over Israel in the summer of 2006.⁶¹ Since then, Hezbollah has moved from securing al-Qusayr in an all-out lighting attack, to a slower less dramatic pace of taking one village at a time in the mountainous Qalamoun region between Damascus and Lebanon.⁶² The region is strategically important, not only commanding the key road from Damascus to the Alawite areas around Latakia to the north, but also as a key rebel smuggling route across which rebel elements move weapons and supplies from supporters in nearby Lebanon into Syria. According to the Hezbollah field commander, Abu Jihad, the plan was to encircle the region

and then with support from the Syrian military, Hezbollah would take the lead on the assault on the ground. Sheik Ahmad, a high-ranking Hezbollah commander in charge of intelligence for Qusayr and Qalamoun, clarified that "We took the decision that none of them is allowed to go out alive."⁶³

Importing Violence to Lebanon

Despite Nasrallah's assertion that violence in Syria could be kept in Syria even with Lebanese groups participating in the carnage, this has not been the case. At first verbal jabs unsurprisingly came from extremist circles. In June, the Abdullah Azzam Brigades, a Lebanon-based al-Qaeda-affiliated group, released a statement challenging Nasrallah and his Hezbollah fighters "to fire one bullet at occupied Palestine and claim responsibility" for it. They could fire at Israel from either Lebanon or Syria, the statement continued, seeing as Hezbollah "fired thousands of shells and bullets upon unarmed Sunnis and their women, elderly and children, and destroyed their homes on top of them."⁶⁴

On July 9 2013, Hezbollah's stronghold in the Beirut suburb Dahiyeh was struck in a car bomb attack. Though approximately 53 were injured, luckily none were confirmed killed in the attack.⁶⁵ Nonetheless, the illusion of Hezbollah's activity in Syria not having any security repercussions for the important Shia base in Beirut was fractured. One month later, Dahiyeh was struck again this time killing 16 people, and injuring another 226.⁶⁶ On November 19, the Abdullah Azzam Brigade issued another statement, this time claiming responsibility for a double suicide attack on the Iranian embassy itself.⁶⁷ The attack killed 25 people, including Iran's cultural attaché Ebrahim Ansari, and injured 150 others.⁶⁸ Clearly Nasrallah's pitch for a gentleman's

agreement under which Lebanese citizens would only slaughter one another across the border has failed with his fellow Lebanese, who wanted an end to Lebanese interference in the war in Syria.

Two weeks after the attack on Iran's embassy, Hezbollah was dealt another blow. Haj Hassan Hilu Laqis, a senior Hezbollah procurement officer (who at one time oversaw a Hezbollah procurement network in North America) was assassinated by at least one unidentified assailant with a silenced 9mm pistol.⁶⁹ On January 2, yet another bombing occurred in Dahiyeh, this time near the residence of Hezbollah deputy Secretary General Naim Qassem.⁷⁰ This attack occurred less than a week after former finance minister and Hariri advisor Mohamad Chatah was assassinated in Beirut near the Lebanese parliament building.⁷¹ The Hezbollah associated al-Akhbar paper reported that in response to the January 2 attack, "It is clear that the popular mood, after the attack in Dahiyeh, was convinced now more than ever of the need to confront extremist groups in Syria and Lebanon. Perhaps the perpetrators thought that by striking at innocent civilians, they would drive them to renounce Hezbollah, or put pressure on the Resistance Party to withdraw from Hezbollah. However, the opposite happens after each attack."⁷²

The day before the January 2 attack, authorities arrested Majid bin Mohammed al-Majid, the leader of the al-Qaeda affiliated Abdullah Azzam Brigades which had claimed responsibility for the Iranian embassy bombing.⁷³ But within days al-Majid was reported to have died (of kidney failure) while in custody.⁷⁴ His suspicious death raised many questions and was quickly followed by a statement released by the Abdullah Azzam Brigades

vowing revenge: “The project of its leader, Majid al-Majid, will be maintained by attacking Iran and its party [Hezbollah] even after his death.”⁷⁵

Hezbollah Pursues its own Interests at the Expense of Lebanon’s

Hezbollah’s deliberate violation of the official Lebanese government’s policy of “disassociation” from the fighting in Syria is not the first time the organization has acted directly against Lebanese interests. In May 2008, in the midst of an ongoing political crisis in which the country was without a President since the previous November, the Lebanese government discovered a Hezbollah surveillance camera in Beirut’s airport. The camera was removed and the army commander in charge of airport security, Brigadier General Wafiq Choucair, a suspected Hezbollah sympathizer, was rotated to a new position.⁷⁶ Later that week, the government announced it would no longer tolerate Hezbollah running its own fiber optic communications network, outside of government regulation or control, and described the network as part of Hezbollah’s “attack on the sovereignty of the state.”⁷⁷ Nasrallah saw the removal as a “declaration of war.”⁷⁸

Local criticism arose soon after when Hezbollah briefly seized control of part of West Beirut, turning the weapons purportedly maintained to “resist” Israel against fellow Lebanese and contributing, according to a senior U.S. intelligence official, “to a dramatic increase in sectarian tensions.”⁷⁹ In the course of the fighting, nearly 100 Lebanese were killed and 250 wounded.⁸⁰

In 2012, when the government of New Zealand blacklisted Hezbollah’s military wing, it determined that the group’s “pre-planned and well-coordinated operation” to take over

West Beirut, and the group’s use of machine guns and rocket-propelled grenades during street battles, constituted an act of terrorism.⁸¹ Still, even before the open intervention in Syria, Hezbollah refused to relinquish its private stockpile of arms to the Lebanese Army, despite periodic explosions of poorly stored weapons in which Lebanese citizens were killed. “We consider our arms like blood flowing in our veins,” Hezbollah Shura Council member Mohammad Yazbek explained in October 2012, pledging not to turn over the party’s weapons “no matter what the costs are.”⁸²

It should not be a surprise that Hezbollah made a miscalculation in Syria; Nasrallah’s view of reality is through a prism of self-interest and absolute obedience to Iran. In late 2012, U.S. and Israeli officials received intelligence that the commander of the Iranian Qods Force, Qasem Soleimani feared the Assad regime was in danger of being defeated by opposition forces. Hezbollah would need to become involved in a much greater military capacity in Syria, or Soleimani argued the window of Iranian supplied advance weaponry directly to Hezbollah through Syria would close.⁸³ U.S. intelligence assessments noted that Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah at first declined repeated requests from Iranian leaders for Hezbollah to send large numbers of experienced fighters to fight on behalf of the Assad regime. While some Hezbollah leaders were inclined to provide the fighters, others resisted what they (correctly) feared would prove to undermine their position and Lebanon and be, as one official put it, “bad for the brand.” Nasrallah only acquiesced, officials explained, after receiving a personal appeal from Iranian Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. Iran, the Supreme Leader made

clear, not only expected Hezbollah to act, but to act decisively.⁸⁴

Hezbollah's disregard for Lebanon's stability is especially highlighted in its role in the 2005 assassination of former Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri. It wasn't until June 2011 when the UN's Special Tribunal for Lebanon – the body charged with investigating the assassination – indicted Mustapha Badreddine and three other Hezbollah operatives for their roles in the 2005 assassination of former Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri (a fifth was added recently as well but it has yet to be decided if he will be tried with the other four).⁸⁵ Evidence implicating Hezbollah as a primary suspect in Hariri's assassination first appeared in May 2009. A story in *Der Spiegel* reported on blatantly suspicious cell phone activity, including one Hezbollah operative who called his girlfriend from a handset used in the operation. And both *Le Monde* and the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation have detailed the group's role in the assassination and its efforts to undermine the Tribunal's investigation.

Badreddine is by far the most significant person named in the trial that began proceedings in January 2014. Although Hezbollah never publicly announced Mughniyah's successor as head of the IJO, Badreddine is often cited as a possible candidate. Like Mughniyah before him, he reportedly sits on the group's shura council and serves as a senior advisor to Secretary-General Hassan Nasrallah. According to a Hezbollah member interrogated by the Canadian Security Intelligence Service, Badreddine is "more dangerous" than Mughniyah, who was "his teacher in terrorism." In a sign of Badreddine's ongoing leadership role in Hezbollah militancy and terrorism, the Treasury Department added him and Talal Hamiyah, "two senior terrorist leaders of

Hezbollah," to the department's terrorist designation list "for providing support to Hezbollah's terrorist activities in the Middle East and around the world."⁸⁶ In May, there were also reports that Badreddine himself was on the ground directing the battle in Qusayr.⁸⁷

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Conclusion

Hezbollah has long played a dominant role in Lebanon, extending its influence through political and social activism as well as terrorism, political violence, and military prowess. But it has long insisted that it acts only with Lebanon's best interests at heart. Today, Hezbollah can no longer maintain that fiction.

Having fanned the flames of war in Syria based on a distinctly sectarian divide, Hezbollah bears significant responsibility for the violence that has now spilled over the border into Lebanon. Indeed, Hezbollah's activities on both sides of the Lebanon-Syria border demonstrate that, contrary to its own propaganda, Hezbollah acts primarily out of its own and in Iran's interests, not those of the Lebanese people.

The implications of Hezbollah's now public "strategic partnership" with Iran is multifaceted. Both Hezbollah and Iran are "all in" in the fight to defend the Assad regime in Syria, and their increasingly close partnership has now spread to other areas as well. For example, consider the statement of Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah regarding the P5+1

negotiations with Iran over Iran's nuclear program. "The alternative to an agreement (on Iran's nuclear program) is a regional war."⁸⁸ Given Hezbollah and Iran's presence on the ground in Syria, that may already be the case.

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Notes

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