

Hezbollah's Pivot Toward the Gulf

By Matthew Levitt

Both for internal reasons and as a product of its close alliance with Iran, Hezbollah has taken a sharp pivot toward confrontation with the Gulf States. For Hezbollah, this pivot is not exclusive of its open-ended battle with Israel but rather an extension of it and of its fight against Sunni rebels in Syria. What started as a battle of words is now threatening to become far more dangerous.

Hezbollah's status in the wider Sunni Arab world has dropped precipitously since its height a decade ago after the 2006 Lebanon War. In the wake of that conflict, Hezbollah rode a wave of popular support across the region. A decade later, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) has labeled Hezbollah a terrorist group and the Gulf States have cracked down on Hezbollah supporters and financiers within their borders.¹ The Arab League and the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) have issued statements condemning Hezbollah as well,² leading to a war of words between the group and Gulf officials. In January 2016, the Saudi government released a report on Iranian-sponsored terrorism that focused heavily on Hezbollah, spanning the group's militant activities from the 1980s to the present.³

But increasingly tense relations—and the larger regional context of a proxy war between Iran, Hezbollah's patron and sponsor, and the Gulf States led by Saudi Arabia—may now be moving this schism from words to actions, threatening more overt violence between Hezbollah and its Shi'a allies and the Gulf States and their Sunni partners. In July, Saudi Prince Turki al-Faisal spoke at a conference about the exiled Iranian rebel group Mujahideen-e-Khalq. Days later, a senior Iranian official claimed to have intelligence linking the Saudis to terrorist plots targeting Iran and warned, "Our message to Saudis from today is if we get angry, we will leave no trace of Saudis on Earth."⁴ Hezbollah Secretary-General Hassan Nasrallah has been equally acerbic toward the Saudis, charging Riyadh with promoting extremism and sectarianism in the region. "Al Saud wants Sunni-Shiite strife," Nasrallah said in January after the execution of Saudi Shiite cleric Sheikh Nimr Baqir al-Nimr. "They are the ones who ignited it before and are doing so in every part of

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the world."⁵

Much has changed since the 2006 Lebanon War when the group inflicted heavy losses on Israeli forces and declared "divine victory" as the first Arab army not to be fully defeated in a war with Israel. Egyptian newspapers ran special supplements and carried full page pictures of Nasrallah with titles like "Nasrallah: In Nasser's Footsteps" and "Nasser 1956—Nasrallah 2006: We will fight and not surrender."⁶ Nasrallah himself appeared on Al Jazeera and, in a clip that aired several times, confidently portrayed Hezbollah as acting in the interests of all Muslims—"A defeat for us is a defeat for the whole Muslim nation."⁷ On the Arab street, Nasrallah and his warriors were heroes of the Arab world.⁸

Ten years after the 2006 war, perceptions of Hezbollah in the eyes of the Arab Sunni world have deteriorated. After the terrorist group designation by the GCC, Nasrallah insisted that most of the Arab world rejected the label and still supported the group.⁹ But polling data from September 2015 paints a different picture, with 86 percent of Jordanians holding a negative view of Hezbollah and the group earning just 13- to 15-percent approval ratings in Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE).¹⁰

Hezbollah has long been active in the Gulf, and there is therefore a history of tension between the group and the Sunni Gulf States. But Hezbollah's activist posture in the region today, in places like Iraq and Yemen but in Syria in particular, has put the group in a position of more direct confrontation with the Gulf States than has been the case for a long time.

Background: History of Hezbollah in the Gulf

Hezbollah has a long history of activity beyond Lebanon's borders, with a particular emphasis on operations in the Gulf. In 1983 Hezbollah and Iraqi Dawa operatives carried out a series of bombings targeting Kuwaiti, American, and French interests in Kuwait, killing six people and wounding nearly 90.¹¹ Over the next few years Hezbollah operatives would be arrested in Bahrain, Kuwait, and Saudi Arabia.¹² In the late 1980s, Saudi Hezbollah (aka Hezbollah al Hejaz) carried out a variety of attacks, from bombing petrochemical facilities to assassinating Saudi diplomats around the world.¹³

Hezbollah operatives remained active in the region, and in 1990 a CIA analysis explicitly tied their activities to Iran, assessing that Iranian-linked terrorist attacks carried out over the previous year "were probably approved in advance" by the president and other senior leaders.¹⁴ In this context, Hezbollah is best known, however, for sending operatives to help local Saudis affiliated with Saudi Hezbollah carry out the June 1996 bombing of Khobar Towers. The largest non-nuclear explosion then on record, the attack killed 19 servicemen and several Saudi citizens in a nearby park; 372 Americans were injured as well.¹⁵

Hezbollah's Regional Posture

The impact of the Syrian war on Hezbollah has been nothing short

of dramatic, shifting the group's focus from battling Israel and contesting the political space within Lebanon to engaging in regional conflicts beyond the borders of Lebanon. Hezbollah deployed a unit to Iraq to train Shi'a militants during the Iraq war, where it worked in close cooperation with Iran, but its deep commitment on the ground in the war in Syria underscores the group's new, regional, pan-Shi'a focus. With the notable exception of Syria, Hezbollah's regional reorientation is most obvious in its increased operational tempo in the Gulf.

In Yemen, a small number of Hezbollah operatives have been training Houthi rebels for some time, but in early 2016 the Gulf-backed Yemeni government claimed to have physical evidence of "Hezbollah training the Houthi rebels and fighting alongside them in attacks on Saudi Arabia's border."¹⁶ Three years earlier, the U.S. government revealed that Khalil Harb, a former special operations commander and a close adviser to Nasrallah, was overseeing Hezbollah's activities in Yemen. He has also traveled to Tehran to coordinate Hezbollah's operations in Yemen with Iran.¹⁷ Harb is not the only senior Hezbollah operative to be deployed to Yemen. Former Hezbollah special operations commander in southern Lebanon Abu Ali Tabtabai, who also spent time fighting in Syria, is likewise reported to have been sent to Yemen.¹⁸ Hezbollah has never been open about these deployments, but Hezbollah Deputy Secretary-General Naim Qassem did warn in April 2015 that Saudi Arabia would "incur very serious losses" and "pay a heavy price" as a result of its Yemen campaign.¹⁹

Beyond Yemen, Hezbollah's support for terrorist groups in the Gulf region also continues unabated. In January, authorities in Bahrain arrested six members of a terrorist cell tied to Hezbollah and blamed for a July 2015 explosion outside of a girls' school in Sitra.²⁰ In August 2015, Kuwaiti authorities raided a terrorist cell of 26 Shi'a Kuwaitis. The cell was accused of amassing "a large amount of weapons, ammunition, and explosives."²¹ After media outlets reported alleged links between the cell, Iran, and Hezbollah, the public prosecutor issued a media gag order on the investigation.²² In January 2016, a Kuwaiti court sentenced a Kuwaiti and an Iranian national to death for spying on behalf of Iran and Hezbollah.²³ In June, a court in Abu Dhabi found the wife of a "prominent Emirati" guilty of spying for Hezbollah.²⁴ The following month, a Kuwait court sentenced a Shi'a member of parliament in absentia for issuing statements deemed insulting to Saudi Arabia and Bahrain and for calling on people to join Hezbollah.²⁵

In 2013, a Hezbollah sleeper cell was busted in the United Arab Emirates. According to court proceedings in April 2016, "the terrorist cell used sex and alcohol" to recruit a group of agents that provided "information about government, security, military and economic institutions as well as UAE's arms deals with various countries to the Hezbollah agents." The prosecution claimed that "two Emiratis, four Lebanese, and a Canadian-Egyptian woman" were blackmailed into participating in the spying scheme. The court case came shortly after the UAE convicted three Lebanese men with setting up a Hezbollah cell.²⁶

Set against this aggressive activity in the Gulf, it was little surprise that in March the GCC designated Hezbollah as a terrorist organization over the "hostile actions of the militia who recruit the young people (of the Gulf) for terrorist acts."²⁷ The Arab League and the OIC followed suit within weeks.²⁸ In fact, this seemingly rapid series of condemnations was three years in the making. In June 2013, GCC countries came to the unanimous conclusion that

Hezbollah was a terrorist group, and several member states began taking discrete actions against the group's supporters in their countries.²⁹ In May 2014, Saudi authorities withdrew the business license of a Lebanese national linked to Hezbollah,³⁰ and a GCC offer to engage Iran in dialogue if Tehran changed its policy on Syria fell on deaf ears.³¹

In response, Hezbollah denied the accusations and accused the Saudis of trying to "silence" Hezbollah because of its refusal to ignore "the crimes the Saudis are committing in Yemen and elsewhere."³² Since then, Nasrallah has slammed the Saudis over the war in Yemen,³³ over its support for Sunni groups in Lebanon,³⁴ and over the beginnings of a rapprochement of sorts with Israel.³⁵ The regional unrest, according to Alaeddin Boroujerdi, chairman of the National Security and Foreign Policy Committee of Iran's Majlis Council, is a result of "the U.S. and Israel" trying to "get Muslim countries entangled in domestic problems" using "takfiri groups, which are the puppets of the United States and their regional allies."³⁶

Hezbollah's intensified involvement in the Gulf is a function of the sustained geopolitical and sectarian tensions between Saudi Arabia and Iran. These tensions spiked in January when Saudi Arabia executed al-Nimr on charges of sedition and taking up arms against Saudi security forces. The sheikh's death sparked outrage across the Shi'a world, and, in Iran, two Saudi diplomatic compounds were stormed in protest. Saudi Arabia sought condemnation of the attacks from the Arab League and the OIC, and both organizations responded accordingly. Lebanon, however, offered only "solidarity." This perceived slight spurred Saudi Arabia to cut off monetary support to Lebanon and pull funds from Lebanese banks.³⁷ Bahrain and the UAE fell in line with the Saudis, issuing travel warnings and travel bans, respectively, for Lebanon.³⁸ A month after the execution and protests, Saudi Arabia blacklisted four companies and three Lebanese businessmen, citing their relationships to Hezbollah.³⁹ The United States had designated these companies and individuals a year earlier, but the Saudi actions indicated a heightened focus on Hezbollah by the kingdom.⁴⁰

Nasrallah has tried to deflect these actions as Israeli machinations, but Hezbollah and Iran have, in fact, been increasingly active in the Gulf in recent years. Iranian, Hezbollah, and Saudi posturing all come against the backdrop of a Gulf that is concerned with a region post-Iran deal (aka Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, or JCPOA). Gulf leadership is wary of an Iranian financial windfall after the deal and the flexibility the regained cash gives Iran and of Hezbollah to destabilize the region. Sunni Gulf states are thus particularly sensitive to Iranian and Hezbollah activity in the Gulf in the year since the announcement of the JCPOA.

Nasrallah has tried to justify Hezbollah's overreach into proxy wars around the region by presenting the issue as a Lebanese national security threat. In July 2016, Sheikh Nabil Qaouq, the deputy head of Hezbollah's Executive Council, derided Saudi Arabia for supporting terrorism in Lebanon and throughout the region. The terrorists "who staged bombings in Beirut, Hermel and the Bekaa, and who abducted and slaughtered the (Lebanese) servicemen are al-Qaida's branch in Lebanon and Syria (Abdullah Azzam Brigades) and al-Nusra Front, and al-Nusra Front is today fighting with Saudi weapons," Qaouq charged. Qaouq accused the Saudis of continuing to arm Jabhat al-Nusra "although it has murdered us, executed our servicemen and continued to occupy our land in the Bekaa," noting that Saudi sponsorship of terrorism "poses a real threat to Lebanese

national security.⁷⁴¹

Alignment of Hezbollah and Iranian Interests

Hezbollah's hardened posture toward the Gulf is the product of two interrelated factors. First, Hezbollah has grown ever closer with Iran, especially in the past few years through its tight operational cooperation with Tehran in Iraq and now—far more intimately—in Syria. To a certain extent, Hezbollah's pique with Riyadh is a function of the spike in Saudi-Iranian tensions and Hezbollah's commitment to the Iranian revolutionary concept of Wilayat el-Faqih (guardianship of the jurist). This doctrine, formulated by Iranian Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, holds that a Shi`a Islamic cleric—in this case, the leader of Iran—should serve as the supreme head of government and leader for Shi`a worldwide. Hezbollah is thus self-committed to the decrees of Iranian clerics, even when these do not seamlessly coincide with the group's own sometimes competing goals. It should be noted that Iranian influence over Hezbollah decision-making goes beyond the principle of Wilayat el-Faqih and is also a product of personal relationships. In that regard, it is worth noting that according to some reports, while unconfirmed, Qassem Suleimani—head of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps-Qods Force—personally appointed the successors to the late Mustapha Badreddine, head of both Hezbollah's military command in Syria and its terrorist wing.⁴²

The second factor underscores that sometimes Iran and Hezbollah's goals are complementary, in whole or in part. In this case, Hezbollah has reasons of its own for taking extreme umbrage at Saudi Arabia and its Gulf allies. Hezbollah finds itself on the ground in Syria fighting and incurring losses at the hands of Saudi-financed and -armed Sunni rebels (terrorists, in Hezbollah's eyes), and it sees the Saudis as supporting anti-Shi`a groups elsewhere in the region as well. In December 2015, Iran's Tasnim News reported that Hezbollah released a statement rejecting Riyadh's call for an Arab anti-terrorism coalition, saying "it is not surprising to anyone that Saudi Arabia is committing terrorism itself, as it did in Yemen, as well as with its support for terrorist groups in Iraq, Syria and Yemen."⁴³ Hezbollah officials have also blamed Riyadh for blocking political solutions to the presidential crisis in Lebanon,⁴⁴ for "committing genocide" in Yemen,⁴⁵ and seeking to normalize relations with Israel.⁴⁶

Analytically, Hezbollah's pivot toward the Gulf should not be seen as a pivot away from Israel. To the contrary, Hezbollah sees a pernicious, budding alliance among the United States, Saudi Arabia, and Israel that is directly benefiting the Sunni "takfiri" militants it is fighting in Syria and, to a lesser extent, elsewhere in the region. And while Hezbollah is taking active measures to prepare for the next, eventual war with Israel, it is eager to avoid such a conflict at the present time given its significant investment of personnel and resources in the Syrian war next door and its desire not to give Israel a pretext to either enter that war on the side of the Sunni rebels or take advantage of Hezbollah's deployment there to target the group's military presence and rocket arsenal in south Lebanon.

The next war between Hezbollah and Israel is only a matter of time. The Syrian war may take precedence over Hezbollah's desire to fight Israel, but it has not altered Hezbollah's hardwired commitment to do so. In this regard, Iran and Hezbollah are largely on the same page, though the deployment of senior Iranians to the Syrian Golan suggests Tehran remains keen on finding ways to attack Israel in the near-term as well. Hezbollah likely agrees,

so long as this can be done in such a way as to minimize the Israeli retaliatory response. There are suggestions that Iran and Hezbollah, in the meantime, are focused on inflicting some measure of pain on the Saudis. According to one report, "the military wing of the Lebanese movement Hezbollah has been instructed by Iran to suspend operations against Israel and to target Saudi Arabia instead."⁴⁷ While almost certainly an exaggeration, other reports indicate Iranian operations targeting the Saudis may already be in motion. For example, the *Manila Times* cited Saudi and Philippine sources describing an alleged Iranian terrorist plot against a Saudi passenger plane in Manila.⁴⁸ Aside from plots abroad, Gulf States are sensitive to Iranian and Hezbollah plots at home, especially in light of the sectarian instability in places like the Eastern Province of Saudi Arabia⁴⁹ and Bahrain.⁵⁰

Tensions Coming to a Head

Hezbollah has a history of targeting Saudi interests, so threats that Riyadh would "pay a heavy price" for its role in the Yemen war struck a chord with Saudi officials.⁵¹ But two incidents in particular highlight how the current war of words between Hezbollah and the Gulf States (and Saudi Arabia in particular) may already be transforming into something more dangerous and operational.

Despite the devastation of the 1996 Khobar Towers bombing, the man accused of orchestrating and executing the attack evaded capture for almost 20 years. Finally, in August 2015, Ahmed al-Mughassil, the military chief of Saudi Hezbollah, was apprehended in Beirut and deported to Saudi Arabia. Mughassil had allegedly lived in Lebanon for years under the protection of Hezbollah.⁵² The Farsi-speaking Mughassil may provide insight into the clandestine operations of Iran and its proxies around the region. In the current sectarian environment in the region, the circumstances of the arrest itself are a source of intrigue. Just as Hezbollah-Saudi tensions are mounting, a Hezbollah operative who evaded capture for years was suddenly caught and deported to Saudi Arabia.

Even more significant than this event is what happened next door in Syria nine months later. Hezbollah was dealt a heavy blow in May with the loss of its most prominent military figure, Mustafa Badreddine. Badreddine was killed in an explosion in Damascus while acting as head of Hezbollah's External Security Organization and its forces in Syria, making him the most senior Hezbollah official killed since the death of former "chief of staff" Imad Mughniyah in 2008. In the 1980s, Badreddine was involved in terrorist attacks in Lebanon and Kuwait, with targets including U.S. embassies and Marine barracks. Badreddine escaped from prison in Kuwait in the early 1990s during the Iraqi invasion there. He fled back to Lebanon and rose to power in Hezbollah, aided by his expertise and family ties to Mughniyah. The two men, Badreddine and Mughniyah, led Hezbollah's military activities for years and founded some of the organization's most infamous units. Describing Badreddine, one Hezbollah operative said he was "more dangerous" than Mughniyah, his longtime "teacher in terrorism."⁵³

The assassination of Badreddine shocked Hezbollah; it lost an especially qualified commander with a unique pedigree as the brother-in-law of Mughniyah and an intimate of Nasrallah. Yet most confounding to Hezbollah was that Israel, Hezbollah's arch enemy, was not the assassin. Though Hezbollah outlets quickly pinned blame for the attack on Israel, Nasrallah soon took to the airwaves to personally announce that there was "no sign or proof leading us to the Israelis." Nasrallah quickly added that Hezbollah is



Members of Hezbollah carry a portrait of one of the group's top commanders, Mustafa Badreddine, who was killed in an attack in Syria, during his funeral in southern Beirut on May 13, 2016. (ANWAR AMRO/AFP/Getty Images)

“not afraid to blame Israel when necessary,” but in this case, “our investigations led us to the [Sunni] terrorist groups.” Nasrallah could not have been clearer: “Within 24 hours we knew who killed Syed Mustafa, don’t just try to point at Israel.”⁵⁴

For some within Hezbollah, the Saudis will come up as likely players behind the scenes, possibly supporting the Sunni rebels Nasrallah says were behind the attack. Indeed, there would be historical precedent for this. The Saudis reportedly supported the Lebanese militants who targeted Sheikh Mohammad Hussein Fadlallah in a failed assassination attempt in 1985.⁵⁵ In fact, the United States has been fairly open about that fact that it has partnered with GCC countries and others to counter Hezbollah’s activities.^a

Conclusion

At its start, Hezbollah defined itself as the “resistance” against Israel, a stance that once brought them enormous popularity throughout the region. And yet, since the start of the Syrian civil war, the group has lost over 1,000 fighters in battles against fellow Muslims, a far cry from its initial mission. In August 2016, Nasrallah threatened Israel with an imminent attack, recalling his triumph of

the last decade. Regardless, Hezbollah’s credibility as an anti-Israel force has been diminished since the 2006 Lebanon War.⁵⁶ Hezbollah is now seen throughout the region as the henchman of Iran in its propagation of sectarianism. No longer is Hezbollah a band of freedom fighters against Israeli occupation, but is rather a group upholding an occupation in Syria. “We are invaders,” a Hezbollah fighter conceded in a May news article. “This is our role now. Yes, I have many questions, but war is too complicated and I have a family to support.”⁵⁷

The war of words between Hezbollah and the Gulf States continues. In June, Nasrallah blasted the Sunni ruling family in Bahrain—calling them “midgets” and “servants” of the Saudi ruling family—after Manama decided to strip the country’s leading Shiite cleric of his citizenship.⁵⁸ Indeed, the Saudis appear more and more frequently as a target of Nasrallah’s ire in each successive speech he delivers. On July 29, Nasrallah made clear his belief that the Saudis are the reason the region’s conflicts persist. He laid blame for Sunni-Shia sectarianism at the feet of Riyadh as well and railed against signs of Saudi-Israeli normalization. The Saudis, Nasrallah concluded, are no different from al-Qa`ida and the Islamic State. “The culture of Saudi Arabia is Wahhabi culture, the culture of Daesh and al-Nusra, even with a changed name...it’s a culture of killing and slaughter and siege and rejection of dialogue.”⁵⁹ From the Saudis, the same is heard in reverse. In January, the Saudi foreign minister had this to say about the group: “Hezbollah, Iran’s surrogate, tries to control Lebanon and wages war against the Syrian opposition—and in the process helps the Islamic State flourish.”⁶⁰

Were this to remain a war of words, it would be one thing. But recent events suggest it is already turning into something more operational and dangerous. **CTC**

a At the release of the State Department’s annual terrorist report in June, a senior U.S. official highlighted these efforts. “Confronting Iran’s destabilizing activities and its support for terrorism was a key element of our expanded dialogue with the countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council, following the leaders’ summit at Camp David in May of [2015]. We’ve also expanded our cooperation with partners in Europe, South America, and West Africa to develop and implement strategies to counter the activities of Iranian-allied and sponsored groups, such as Hezbollah.” “Country Reports on Terrorism 2015 Special Briefing with Justin Siberell, Acting Coordinator for Counterterrorism,” U.S. Department of State press release, June 2, 2016.

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