



# RESEARCH NOTES

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## MINDING THE HOME FRONT Hezbollah in Lebanon

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Triggered by the March 2011 uprising against the regime of Bashar al-Assad, the civil war in Syria has been marked by the extensive military involvement of Hezbollah, the Lebanon-based Shiite Muslim militant group and political party. Although considered a terrorist organization by the United States, the “Party of God” is embraced by Lebanon’s Shiite population as a resistance movement and represented within the Lebanese government. Backed by Iran and Syria, Hezbollah has an extensive security apparatus and a wide-reaching social services network. Hezbollah has always framed itself according to its resistance against Israel and its commitment to *moumana* (securing immunity from Western influence) in the Middle East, alongside Syria and Iran. In recent years, especially since the end of the Pax Syriana—a period of stability brokered by Syria in the mid-1980s and lasting until 2005, when Syria ended its occupation of Lebanon—the organization has become a powerful foreign policy arm for Iran. Hezbollah’s involvement in the Syrian civil war, revealed by the deployment of its fighters around the Sayyeda Zainab shrine in Damascus in 2012 and in the al-Qusayr region in early 2013, helped tilt the odds in the regime forces’ favor. It also led to a series of reprisal bombings in Hezbollah-controlled areas of Lebanon by members of the predominantly Sunni Muslim Syrian rebellion.

Several papers, sponsored by organizations such as the International Crisis Group and the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, including Carn-



egie’s online journal *Sada*, have addressed Hezbollah’s involvement in Syria.<sup>1</sup> However, this paper goes beyond the emphasis of such reports—which often discuss the effects of Hezbollah’s war involvement on the regional power balance and Lebanon’s economics and security—by also probing the party’s relationship with its Lebanese constituency.

Alongside the experts named in this report, some forty Lebanese Shiites were interviewed, including fifteen from southern Lebanon, twelve from Beirut, ten from the largely Shiite Beqa Valley, and two Shiite party members, in addition to security sources and Hezbollah fighters. The interviews were conducted off the record due to security concerns. A request for an interview with Hezbollah’s public relations arm was declined.

This study begins with a brief look at Hezbollah prior to the Sunni-led uprising in Syria, which has shifted the region’s sectarian and political power balance, threatening Hezbollah’s main ally, the Alawite Assad regime. It then reviews Hezbollah’s expressions of support for other Arab Spring uprisings and discusses how the group’s support for the Syrian regime changed that trend, followed by a discussion of Hezbollah’s strategy and missions in Syria. Next comes a focus on the political repercussions of the Syrian war involvement, accompanied by a look at how Hezbollah’s various Shiite constituents view the group’s actions. The next sections explore the sectarian religious dimensions of the war in both Syria and

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Lebanon, and discuss the resulting radicalization. The conclusion highlights Hezbollah's thus far successful four-pronged management of the war's fallout in Lebanon: (1) securing victories in border regions where Syrian rebels have staged attacks against Hezbollah; (2) relying on the Lebanese army to curb the terror threat in sensitive areas; (3) creating a Lebanese unity government in which the party and its opponents responded together to the war's impact; and (4) cracking down on internal Shiite dissent.

### Hezbollah: Origins and Development

Hezbollah was not always the state-within-a-state that it is today. The group, headed by religious clerics, emerged in 1982 as a guerrilla faction during Lebanon's civil war after splitting with the secular Amal Party. Iran's Islamic Revolution of 1979 was central to Hezbollah's creation. In the early 1980s, some five thousand members of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) had traveled to Lebanon to oversee "the process of mobilization, recruitment, religious education and military training" of Lebanese Shiites.<sup>2</sup>

Hezbollah only joined the Lebanese political system after the 1989 Taif Accord, which set the terms for ending the country's fifteen-year civil war. The agreement attempted to end the sectarian rivalry that sparked the war by establishing a new division of power based on a Muslim-Christian balance. Taif stripped the presidency, reserved for Maronite Christians, of extensive powers, reallocating them to the Council of Ministers, also equally divided between Christians and Muslims and headed by a Sunni prime minister. The position of parliament speaker was left to the Shiites. In what would be a consequential move, Taif allowed Hezbollah to remain armed while other parties were forced to relinquish their weapons. This provision, devised by Syrian power brokers in Lebanon under the banner of resistance against Israel, allowed the Assad regime to exert pressure on the Israelis in negotiations over the Golan Heights. Demonstrating its political viability, the group officially entered politics in 1992, when it won 8 parliament seats out of 128.

Since Hezbollah's creation, Iran has used the group to advance its strategic and political aims in

the region. Working through the Assad regime, the Islamic Republic has directed a steady supply of weapons into the hands of the Lebanese militia, which initially devoted its energy to targeting the Israeli troops who began occupying southern Lebanon in 1982. The armed resistance registered a major success in 2000 when it drove the Israelis to withdraw from Lebanon. Yet this victory also forced Hezbollah to rearticulate its need to simultaneously serve as a political party and bear arms.

Hezbollah's position was further threatened in 2005, when Syria ended its political and military presence in Lebanon following massive protests attending the assassination of Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri, a Sunni. Many blamed the strike on the Assad regime, and Hezbollah responded by becoming more active in internal Lebanese politics, demonstrating remarkable resilience in the face of domestic and regional stressors. Today the group justifies its continued militarization by citing the need to defend Lebanon against Israel and its "occupation" of the disputed Shebaa Farms on the Lebanon-Syria border.

After the Hariri assassination—for which five Hezbollah members are currently being prosecuted in absentia by the Special Tribunal for Lebanon (STL)—the March 14 coalition coalesced, consisting of Christian, Druze, and Sunni parties, and demanded that the party disarm. Hezbollah fought off such pressures, even as tensions mounted in light of more assassinations targeting March 14 leaders. Hezbollah also emerged strong from its bloody thirty-four-day war with Israel in summer 2006, retaining its southern Lebanese base of support despite the loss of more than 1,100 Lebanese lives. A study conducted during the war by the Beirut Center for Research and Information showed that 87 percent of Lebanese backed Hezbollah's response to "Israeli aggression."<sup>3</sup> However, the war was not without consequences for the group, with corruption scandals ensnaring several members.<sup>4</sup> According to Shiite activist Lokman Slim, "[The war] created nouveaux riches within the Hezbollah party structure, something that was becoming more and more apparent to many Shiites, even among the party's backers."<sup>5</sup>

Outcomes for the organization have been mixed in the years since the war with Israel. In particular, Hezbollah's military takeover of downtown Beirut and parts of the Choueifat, Aley, and Chouf Druze regions in May 2008 sparked a week of civil unrest that resulted in sixty-seven deaths. The Qatari-mediated Doha agreement, which ended the conflict, granted Hezbollah veto power in the cabinet. This meant that the resignation of any Hezbollah-led coalition would prompt the government's fall. Indeed, in 2011 Hezbollah used its veto power to take down Prime Minister Saad Hariri's government over its support for the STL. Since then, Hezbollah has participated in two successive governments. Despite residual challenges associated with the Syrian army's 2005 withdrawal, the organization's domestic military and political power has increased. However, its local and regional standing has suffered over its continued backing of the Assad regime in Syria, in turn fueling sectarian violence in Lebanon.

### **Hezbollah and the Arab Spring**

In early 2011, when widespread protests collectively known as the Arab Spring erupted across the Middle East, Hezbollah initially welcomed the developments. When an antigovernment rebellion started in Egypt, Hezbollah secretary-general Hassan Nasrallah declared: "You [Egyptians] are waging the war of Arab dignity. Today, with your voices, blood and steadfastness, you are retrieving the dignity of the Arab people, dignity that was humiliated by some rulers of the Arab world for decades."<sup>6</sup> Hezbollah had always had a tense relationship with Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak, who had blamed the group for planning terror attacks in Egypt in 2010;<sup>7</sup> Hezbollah, in turn, had accused the Egyptian political elite of collusion with Israel. Hezbollah also supported largely poorer Bahraini protestors from Shiite areas who took to the streets against the minority Khalifa dynasty. And the organization welcomed the popular Libyan movement that toppled the regime of longtime foe Muammar Qadhafi, whom Hezbollah accused of responsibility for the 1978 disappearance of Lebanese Shiite leader and Amal founder Imam Musa al-Sadr.

The March 2011 Syrian uprising challenging the Assad dynasty's forty-year rule—sparked when children were arrested for painting antigovernment graffiti in the southern city of Deraa—forced Hezbollah to sharply shift course. Nasrallah soon called on Syrian rebels to support Assad and enter into dialogue with the government. "Bashar is serious about carrying out reforms, but he has to do them gradually and in a responsible way," said Nasrallah in a televised speech in May 2011. "He should be given the chance to implement those reforms."<sup>8</sup>

Nasrallah's narrative was motivated by geopolitics and his group's reliance on Iran, which had spent the past decade consolidating its gains in the Shiite Crescent, the area stretching from its border with Iraq westward to Syria and Lebanon. Iran's ally in the Syrian regime, whose Alawite faith is an offshoot of Shia Islam, led to the creation of the *moumana* axis, built on a common enmity toward Israel and Western involvement in the region. In Lebanon and Iraq, Iran achieved a near political monopoly over Shiites. The Syrian uprising threatened those gains. The possibility of a Sunni movement in Syria spreading to Lebanon and Iraq could weaken Iran and its proxy Hezbollah, as well as Iran's bargaining power in the foreign policy arena. A regime change in Syria would also mean the end of the steady weapons supply to Hezbollah and hinder its successes in deterring Israeli aggression. Nasrallah argued that the uprising in Syria bolstered U.S.-Israeli designs in the region.

### **Hezbollah in Syria**

As the uprising continued, Hezbollah's tone toward the rebels grew increasingly harsh, with party members emphasizing the threat posed to Shiite shrines, particularly Sayyeda Zainab in Damascus. Not all prominent Shiites agreed, however. "The shrines have been protected for the past fourteen hundred years by Syrians," noted Sayyed Hani Fahs, a respected Lebanese Shiite cleric.<sup>9</sup> In 2013, Hezbollah's television station, al-Manar, started broadcasting footage of fighters near the Zainab mosque.<sup>10</sup> In May of that year, Nasrallah escalated his rhetoric, announcing that his forces would prevail in the Syrian uprising. "This battle is ours," he said in what many saw

as a surprising turn, “and I promise you victory.”<sup>11</sup> His statement dovetailed with news of dozens of Hezbollah militant deaths in the May 19 offensive launched by the Assad regime on rebels holding the city of al-Qusayr. Hezbollah unit commander Abu Ali said that the organization had by then become the regime’s de facto ground assault force in certain border areas. “The Syrian army only played a secondary role in al-Qusayr, deploying after each area was completely ‘cleansed’ and secured,” said Abu Ali,<sup>12</sup> who, like the other Shiite interviewees in this report, asked that his real name not be printed. Al-Qusayr, a crossing point into Lebanon, has strategic importance for the regime, lying as it does between Damascus and the Mediterranean coast, an area known as the Alawite heartland and home to Syria’s two main seaports, Latakia and Tartus.

Abu Ali, the Hezbollah unit commander, elaborated on the Hezbollah-Iran connection. “These [Hezbollah] forces are now using the training in street fighting they received in Iran,” he said. Hezbollah’s seizure of al-Qusayr was followed by successful campaigns in the Qalamoun region between Damascus and Homs and adjacent to Lebanon’s eastern border. By taking the Qalamoun area and its main city of Yabroud, the Assad regime and Hezbollah were able to cut off a major weapons supply line to the rebels, who were also using Yabroud as a manufacturing center for car bombs to use in retaliatory attacks against Hezbollah in Lebanon.

### Hezbollah’s Syria Involvement: Reverberations across Lebanon

Although Hezbollah has scored several victories against the rebels in Syria, its involvement there has led to major repercussions in Lebanon, including rising sectarian tensions. In April 2013, in response to Hezbollah’s escalating involvement in Syria, radical Lebanese Salafi sheikhs Ahmed Assir and Salem al-Refai called for jihad in Syria. In Refai’s words, “I called for jihad in Syria primarily to contain Hezbollah’s intervention in al-Qusayr.”<sup>13</sup>

Hezbollah’s involvement in Syria also led to several rebel attacks on Hezbollah bastions and Shiite areas in the Beqa Valley and Beirut. The first was in

May 2013—a few hours after Nasrallah vowed on television to help Assad achieve victory<sup>14</sup>—when two rockets struck Hezbollah’s stronghold in southern Beirut. Then, in June and July, five separate roadside bombings targeted Hezbollah convoys in the Beqa Valley.<sup>15</sup> In August 2013, a car bomb struck southern Beirut, killing twenty and wounding more than a hundred.<sup>16</sup> A Sunni group calling itself the Brigades of Aisha claimed responsibility, promising more operations against Hezbollah.

A few months later, the bombings morphed into suicide attacks. On November 19, 2013, two suicide bombings rocked the Iranian embassy in Lebanon, killing at least twenty-three, including an Iranian cultural attaché and three embassy guards. The Abdullah Azzam Brigades, a Lebanon-based Palestinian organization with links to al-Qaeda, claimed responsibility and threatened further attacks unless Iran withdrew its forces and those of its allies from Syria.<sup>17</sup> This suicide bombing was followed by several others claimed by Jabhat al-Nusra (JN) in Lebanon, an offshoot of the al-Qaeda-affiliated group of the same name in Syria. In June 2014, three consecutive bombings targeted areas in Beirut; two of these were committed by the Azzam Brigades and another by the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS), which recently shortened its name to the Islamic State (IS) when it declared a caliphate in parts of Syria and Iraq.<sup>18</sup> Moreover, the ISIS surge in Iraq has helped reactivate cells in Lebanon, with dozens arrested for links to terrorist groups, including French and Saudi nationals. JN has threatened Hezbollah with thousands of fighters now present in Lebanon who are “waiting to begin the attack.”<sup>19</sup>

The threat of explosions has led to heightened security measures, especially during Ramadan, a holy month for all Muslims, forcing Hezbollah to cancel its traditional *iftars* and other festivities.<sup>20</sup> The bombings, erection of roadblocks, and resulting rise in Sunni-Shiite tensions have hit Hezbollah’s bastion in southern Beirut particularly hard, damaging the economy in the process. A commodities distributor reported a 60 percent drop in sales, with several other southern Beirut professionals pointing to similar declines. “We are still fifty percent down in spite

of renewed calm,” said a local business owner who identified himself as Muhammad. “Most customers are still afraid to come to [this area] or find it too difficult to shop here due to massive traffic caused by enhanced security at the entrance, as well as the lack of parking spots due to security measures.” In addition, dozens of people interviewed for this study have reported that they or their family members have moved away from southern Beirut or the area around the Iranian embassy owing to safety concerns.<sup>21</sup>

Not only southern Lebanon but the entire Lebanese economy has suffered, with GDP amounting to less than 1 percent in 2013 due to weakening domestic economic activity. The biggest economic blow to Shiites in particular came from measures taken by the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries of Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, Oman, and the United Arab Emirates shortly after Hezbollah’s seizure of al-Qusayr. The bloc said it would crack down on Hezbollah’s members as part of a joint effort to limit the group’s “financial and business transactions.” The Associated Press reported that “hundreds of Shiites have been quietly expelled from the UAE, Saudi Arabia and other Gulf Arab states on suspicion of being supporters of Hezbollah.”<sup>22</sup> According to Nassib Ghobril, head economist for Lebanon’s Byblos Bank, the GCC accounts for about 60 percent of total expatriate remittance inflow to Lebanon, which amounted to about \$8 billion in 2013. Deportations of Lebanese Shiites, especially if the practice becomes more widespread, could significantly hurt deportees’ families, who had counted on receiving the remittances.

### **What the People Think**

According to researcher Mohammad Chamseddine of Information International, which conducted an early 2014 study on Lebanese Shiite views of Hezbollah’s involvement in the Syrian war, about 65 percent of those polled support such involvement.<sup>23</sup> “There is consensus around Hezbollah’s decision to go to Syria,” as seen in media reports, said Amal Saad-Ghorayeb, who wrote a book on Hezbollah.<sup>24</sup> However, when one looks deeper, the Shiite community’s reading of the Syrian war and Hezbollah’s involvement is more

textured. Popular Shiite perceptions on the matter vary greatly from one Lebanese region to another, depending both on their geographical proximity to Israel and on their exposure to recent bombings. For example, according to author interviews conducted in southern Lebanon, fourteen of fifteen residents endorse Hezbollah’s narrative that the Syrian war resulted from an attack on the *moumana* axis by “Zionists and Salafists” and was aimed at destroying Hezbollah’s deterrent power against Israel.

“This alliance [between Zionists and Salafists] posed an existential threat for Shiites,” said a Hezbollah supporter from southern Lebanon who identified himself as Hussein. The well-documented involvement of Sunni jihadists from other Arab countries, particularly in the Gulf—as well as from the West—has only hardened this view among Shiites. Central to their support for Hezbollah’s narrative, as shown in Hezbollah parliament member Nawaf al-Musawi’s recent speech,<sup>25</sup> is southerners’ shared loyalty to the core mission of Hezbollah, which they perceive as their only protector against Israeli aggression. “Hezbollah was the first party to stand in the face of Israel,” said a southern Lebanese woman named Manal. For the journalist and analyst Hazem al-Amine, “The war in Syria has underlined the fact that Hezbollah is increasingly becoming a southern party.”<sup>26</sup>

Another reality emerges in interviews with Beirut Shiites, particularly in the southern suburbs, where many of the 2013 retaliatory attacks took place, killing at least fifty-seven. In March 2014, some fifty local business owners blocked a road in the Ouzai area of southern Beirut after Hezbollah security forces near the al-Manar building prevented them from reaching their workplaces.<sup>27</sup> Some residents have blamed Hezbollah for the terror, which has forced them to flee the area. Hana, a hairdresser, wondered if Hezbollah might not have better spent its time “blocking the borders instead of going to fight in Syria and thus fueling the resentment of Syrians.” In addition, eight out of eleven Beirut interviewees expressed unhappiness over the deterioration Lebanese Sunni-Shiite relations, wherein Sunnis overwhelmingly side with the Syrian rebellion.<sup>28</sup> “People in the south or in

the Beqa do not experience rising tensions like we do here in Beirut,” said Ali, a resident of the city’s Haret Hreik neighborhood. In addition, families are growing increasingly upset over their relatives’ deaths in Syria, according to an Amal Party member who spoke on condition of anonymity. In the local *Nahar* newspaper, Fatima Abdullah wrote an obituary for her brother Hassan, who fought in Syria, flouting the Hezbollah ban on comments by families about the death of their relatives in the Syrian war.<sup>29</sup>

In addition to residential location, the various religious guides seem to influence Shiite opinion. Followers of the Najaf-oriented Sheikh Ali Fadlallah, son of Sheikh Muhammad Fadlallah, expressed greater worry than did Hezbollah members over the group’s involvement in the Syria fighting and the repercussions in Lebanon.<sup>30</sup> Until the June 2014 surge by ISIS in Iraq, Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani had refused to sanction fighting in a war he views as political rather than religious. By contrast, in 2013 senior Shiite clerics in Iran’s holy city of Qom issued fatwas enjoining their followers to fight in Syria.<sup>31</sup>

Hezbollah’s involvement in Syria did get a boost following its victory in Qalamoun, which allowed the group to secure Lebanon’s border with Syria and thus block the infiltration of Syrian rebels responsible for many of the terror attacks. Before Hezbollah took the strategic area, Shiite criticism of its management of the Syria conflict was gaining ground behind closed doors.<sup>32</sup> Many Shiites in Lebanon worried that the organization had forsaken its commitment to Lebanon in favor of its larger alliance with Iran and the Assad regime. However, the fall of Qalamoun and the success of the party’s joint security plan with the Lebanese government created a shift in perception. Initiated in April 2014, the security plan has focused on cracking down on terror and criminal rings across the country, regardless of sectarian affiliation.

Remarking on the Qalamoun turnaround, analyst Kassem Kassir, who specializes in radical groups, quoted the Arabic saying “Military losses have one father, while victories always have many.” Dr. Talal Atrissi, dean of the Doctoral School of Literature, Humanities, and Social Sciences at The Lebanese University, echoed this view, noting that the Qala-

moun success had emboldened Shiites and helped dampen criticism of Hezbollah among certain Shiite circles in southern Beirut.

Meanwhile, a different dynamic prevails among Shiites in the Beqa Valley, a rural and fairly lawless area where the Lebanese state has a shaky foothold. Filling the security gap in the Beqa is Hezbollah’s network, which parallels that of the state; thus, state intervention in this area can be a sensitive matter. While most area Shiites support Hezbollah and its involvement in Syria, these Shiites have paid a high price for the war through increased tensions with Sunnis, particularly in the Aرسال region, a hub for Syrian militants crossing the border. A series of reciprocal kidnappings in March 2013 between Sunni residents of Aرسال and the Shiite Jaafar clan ended with the release of captives held by both sides. The kidnappings, however, offered a stark reminder of the sectarian kidnappings that marked Lebanon’s bloody civil war years. In June, the area also witnessed sectarian killings.<sup>33</sup> Ultimately, Shiites in the Beqa region opted for Hezbollah’s religiosity over the Syrian rebels’ fanaticism.<sup>34</sup>

The Syrian war has also had a severe economic impact on the Beqa area, not just for legitimate businesses but, due to the border closure, also for illegal smugglers of goods and drugs. Drug busts have increased in the last few months,<sup>35</sup> as a result of the government security plan. In addition, many Beqa Shiites belong to tight-knit clans, and their allegiance to these clans trumps their support for Hezbollah, their economic interests often prevailing over political considerations.

### Competing Religious Narratives

Since Hezbollah has gone public with its involvement in the Syrian war, the religious myth of *Kitab al-Jafr* (the Book of Jafr) has been revived as a means of explaining the conflict. The *Kitab* involves “a series of old symbolic events, whose interpretation explains the nature of the events that will take place before Judgment Day.”<sup>36</sup> According to Shiite interviewees, the conflict in Syria is linked to the reappearance of the Mahdi, or redeemer, which will precede the end of days. Hussein, a resident of Beirut’s Shiite Dahiya

neighborhood, explains, “The Jafr says that [Syrian president] Assad will be killed during this war, and then the country will be ruled by a Sunni leader who will persecute Shiites.” This state of injustice, according to the myth, will end when an army from the East intervenes and liberates Syria. This Eastern power is viewed by many believers in the narrative to be Iran: “This army will keep marching toward Jerusalem to liberate it from the Jews. There, Imam Mahdi will appear to pray in Jerusalem along with the Messiah [Jesus]. This is the scene where the earthly time comes to an end and the divine era—where justice, fairness and peace prevail—will start.”<sup>37</sup>

Hezbollah has tapped this narrative to appeal to its most religious backers, but at the increased risk of inflaming Lebanese Sunnis, who have become disenchanted by their traditional leadership and increasingly attracted to Salafi and jihadist voices. Sunni Lebanese youth residing in areas of direct sectarian conflict have been especially susceptible to extremist alternatives perceived as the only alternative to Hezbollah’s increasing countrywide clout. In an April 2013 sermon, the radical sheikh Ahmed Assir invoked the “religious duty of every Muslim who is able to do so to enter into Syria in order to defend its people, its mosques and religious shrines, especially in Qusayr and Homs.” In the words of the Tripoli-based Salafi sheikh Bilal Dogmak, “The war [has] also echoed strongly within Lebanese who identified with sectarian fighting opposing Sunnis against Alawites.”<sup>38</sup>

### **Radicalization of Hezbollah Fighters**

For Hezbollah militants fighting in Syria, as for their opponents, the war’s religious dimension is central. Hezbollah fighters and followers, echoing Kitab al-Jafr, have framed the conflict as a prelude to the apocalypse—and as a chapter in the 1,400-year Sunni-Shiite conflict rooted in who should succeed the Prophet Muhammad.

Part of this religious mission is martyrdom. According to one source close to the organization, more than five hundred Hezbollah fighters have been killed in Syria to date, exceeding the four hundred killed during the summer 2006 war against Israel.<sup>39</sup> At a funeral for a Hezbollah militant killed in Syria,

attended by Hezbollah expert Nicholas Blanford, chants rose of “*Labyakh Ya Hussein*,” an exhortation of loyalty to a revered Shiite imam.”<sup>40</sup>

Alongside the religious-historical component, many Hezbollah fighters interviewed described the Syria campaign as a battle of survival against the dual threat of Israeli aggression and the rise of radical Sunni Salafists. The purported convergence of Salafi and Israeli interests has indeed been central to the discourse of Hezbollah militants, with many fighters underlining in media reports their defense of Lebanon from foreign plotters—namely, Salafists financed by the Gulf countries.<sup>41</sup> “Is there any better way to die than by protecting the Sayyeda Zainab shrine [in Syria]?” remarked one fighter.<sup>42</sup> Hezbollah—which guarantees protection to its martyrs’ families—has integrated the Shiite concept of martyrdom and suffering in its Syria fight, according to Mona Fayyad, a Lebanese University sociology professor. This concept can be traced to the martyrdom of Imam Hussein, grandson of the Prophet Muhammad. As reported by a Hezbollah field commander, Iran’s Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei told Hezbollah chief Hassan Nasrallah that Syria was the second Karbala, original site of the Sunni-Shiite schism. The commander continued, “This means that we must sacrifice our lives for this cause, as did Imam Hussein in Karbala.”<sup>43</sup>

Hezbollah fighters believe the organization’s success in the face of Israeli aggression and incursion can be attributed to a culture of sacrifice and endurance. Meanwhile, the Syrian war has amplified the sectarian militancy of fighters encouraged by the group’s doomsday creed. When asked how comfortable he was killing a fellow Muslim, one Hezbollah fighter answered, “A *takfiri* [radical Sunni, in this case] is not a human being.”<sup>44</sup> Such an attitude offers particularly worrisome risks for Lebanon, a country with a long and bitter history of internecine violence.

### **Managing Fallout in Lebanon**

In involving itself in the Syrian war, Hezbollah initially drew mounting criticism from a section of its popular base, especially over reprisal attacks on Lebanese soil. But the organization has succeeded in reversing the tide. A Hezbollah official explained as follows:

The party's strong attachment to the idea of unity [between the leadership and its supporters] is what made the decision obvious for the Resistance leaders to protect its popular base. During a short time, the security body within Hezbollah took a series of decisions to respond to the aggression on its people after political communications and diplomatic movement failed.<sup>45</sup>

The first part of the group's four-part plan to manage fallout in Lebanon thus involves securing victories in border regions where Syrian rebels have staged anti-Hezbollah attacks. Notably, the fall of Yabroud to Syrian forces and Hezbollah was followed by a media blitz in Hezbollah and allied media outlets. An article in *al-Akbar* announced, "We Took Revenge for You in Yabroud," while another proclaimed, "Yabroud Is No One's Tomb," a reference to a Syrian rebel's boast that the town would be Hezbollah's cemetery.<sup>46</sup> A southern Beirut resident named Kassem commented, "Many of us who had doubt as to Hezbollah's decision before Qalamoun now feel the decision was in our best interest. The party delivered on all its promises." Many Hezbollah followers pointed out that Nasrallah does not go back on his word, unlike most popular Lebanese politicians.

The plan's second part entails outreach to and cooperation with the Lebanese Army, with which Hezbollah has historically had an ambivalent relationship. According to an army official speaking on condition of anonymity, "Hezbollah shared its security information with the army, which helped the military make many arrests. The military also received intelligence from the United States."<sup>47</sup> The U.S. intelligence led to the arrest of Majid Majid, the leader of the Abdullah Azzam Brigades, as well as Naim Abbas, who, according to media reports, was either fully or partly responsible for many of the terrorist attacks in southern Beirut.<sup>48</sup> Following his arrest, Abbas disclosed a wealth of intelligence information and implicated other figures in the network, including Syrian, Lebanese, and Palestinian militants.<sup>49</sup> Many of the Palestinian militants involved in anti-Hezbollah attacks belonged to known terror groups operating inside Lebanon's Palestinian refugee camps, such as the Azzam Brigades, Fatah

al-Islam, and Jund al-Sham, which have links with al-Qaeda. Lebanese figures identified by the security team were tied to radical Sheikh Ahmed al-Assir, according to a Palestinian source speaking on condition of anonymity.

The organization also reached out to the Lebanese Army for help in its crackdown on Shiite gangs that were selling stolen vehicles to Syrian rebels, who would eventually booby-trap them to be exploded in Hezbollah areas. By leaving Lebanon's army with the task of securing these areas, Hezbollah avoided angering Sunnis who support the Syrian rebels as well as some Shiites who were not happy with the curbs placed on their smuggling activities in the Beqa Valley.

Third, Hezbollah acted to smooth domestic political relations. The party showed the extent of its pragmatism by forming a new government with its political foes from the March 14 coalition. It went further by allocating the powerful and often fought-over ministries of interior and justice to its political adversaries. According to Kassem Kassir, the specialist in radical groups, "Hezbollah is more relaxed now that it has a partner who can share the responsibility of the problems."

Fourth and finally, Hezbollah has sought to control the damage from its involvement in the Syrian war by cracking down harder on any voice of dissent among its Shiite base. As an example, in April 2014 the house of Ali al-Amine, editor of *al-Balad* newspaper and a critical voice against the party, was vandalized in southern Lebanon. Amine himself commented, "This is not an isolated incident. It is an example of a vast intimidation campaign that is invisible because people do not report it."<sup>50</sup> In addition, several arrests were made in southern Beirut of journalists, such as members of the al-Aan TV team, which was filming a documentary on Hezbollah.<sup>51</sup> The recent defamatory campaign against *NOW Lebanon* editor Hanin Ghaddar, a vocal critic of the organization, is another example. Ghaddar was targeted after she took part in a Washington Institute symposium.<sup>52</sup> Hezbollah has also banned interviews of the families of its Syrian war martyrs. Indeed, Hezbollah is drawing redlines that cannot be crossed by the media when it comes to Syria.

## Conclusion

In declaring its support three years ago for the Assad regime against the rebel insurgency, Hezbollah damaged its legitimacy as a voice against oppression. Yet the group's recent successes in Syria have allowed it to strengthen its position in Lebanese politics. By strategically partnering with another Lebanese Shiite party, Amal, headed by parliament president Nabih Berri, and with the Christian Free Patriotic Movement, led by Michel Aoun, Hezbollah has effectively wrested control of executive and legislative decision making through its veto power. Lately, on the executive end, Hezbollah has refused to vote for a presidential candidate, since its own preferred figure, Aoun, lacks enough votes to win.<sup>53</sup> Indeed, the presidency remains vacant.

Today's political deadlock is reminiscent of the 2006–2008 crisis, during which Hezbollah and Amal representatives resigned after the government of Fouad Siniora passed a draft law for a proposed international court to investigate the Hariri assassination. The party turned its military power against the Siniora government in May 2008 after the latter declared Hezbollah's telecommunication network illegal. The Qatari-negotiated May 2008 Doha agreement temporarily ended the deadlock, but it consecrated the artificial concept of a consensual government in which Hezbollah and its Christian ally would have a veto over major political decisions. Both the current vacuum and the 2008 crisis have confirmed a new unofficial redistribution among Christians, Sunnis, and Shiites, effectively granting Shiites and Hezbollah a third of the power, thanks to its previously mentioned alliances. Practically speaking, this arrangement supplants the terms established by the Taif Accord, which divided power equally between Muslims and Christians. While Hezbollah has not yet questioned the Taif Accord's legitimacy, it may be emboldened by Assad's battlefield gains—and, by extension, those of Iran—to push for an official one-third share for Lebanon's Shiites, joined by one-third for Sunnis and one-third for Christians, with possibly rotating leadership posts for each faith group.

The scene in Syria remains uncertain for Hezbollah, however. In particular, recent ISIS gains in Iraq

have sparked an exodus of Shiite fighters across the Euphrates River, and ISIS has likewise sent additional members to Lebanon.<sup>54</sup> According to Nicholas Blanford, "A drawdown of Iraqi Shiites could make Syria's regime even more dependent on Hezbollah fighters, further straining the Lebanese group's support base."<sup>55</sup> In Syria, Hezbollah battlefield successes have relied on a partnership with the Syrian army in which the group spearheaded assaults before turning over captured territory to other Shiite militias from Iraq or Syria. Now, ISIS's Iraq surge has compelled Iraqi Shiite fighters to return home to prop up Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki and Shiite areas.

Without the support of groups such as Liwa Abu Fadl al-Abbas and Asaib Ahl al-Haqq, Hezbollah's position in Syria may well be weakened. Renewed clashes in Qalamoun and additional Hezbollah casualties strongly point to this trend.<sup>56</sup> Alongside the human toll, Hezbollah's effort in Syria has affected the group's finances, possibly hindering its broad social service efforts in Lebanon in the longer term. As summarized by an anonymous figure with close access to the organization, "Hezbollah's engagement in several military theaters implies that its revenues must be distributed to a number of causes and a greater numbers of recipients."<sup>57</sup> A related trend was underlined by the sister of a Hezbollah fighter who died recently in Syria. Speaking on condition of anonymity, she remarked that the family's compensation was smaller than the amounts distributed during the 2006 war with Israel.

Further suggesting vulnerability at home was the June resurgence of bombings against Hezbollah targets in Lebanon. Such attacks may well inspire dormant Sunni terrorist cells, particularly those in Syrian and Palestinian refugee camps, to strike again. Such camps have historically offered a steady flow of fighters in the internal Lebanese war against Hezbollah.

As a result of these dynamics, Hezbollah finds itself at a critical juncture both internally and regionally. Fundamental questions about the group's identity have once again come to the fore. To sum up, is Hezbollah a Lebanese organization that defends its constituents' interests or an instrument of Iran's foreign policy that will enter conflicts across the border

as needed? For all the casualties the group has suffered abroad, its main threats may lie in increasing numbers of terrorism-related civilian deaths inside Lebanon, the dip in the Lebanese economy caused by the security situation, and the party's reduced ability to financially assist its constituents following attacks. According to one Shiite resident of southern Beirut, "In 2006, no one asked questions; money was being distributed in millions. Now it is different."<sup>58</sup> However the emergence of the Islamic state in Syria and Iraq (ISIS) in Lebanese border areas such as Ersal, in the Beqa, where the number of clashes between radical jihadi groups, the Party of God,<sup>59</sup> and more recently the Lebanese army<sup>60</sup> has been on the rise, has allowed the party to consolidate its power and to successfully fend off challenges to its primacy.

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