

Iran Will Spare Hezbollah in Its Conflict with Israel, for Now

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Brief Analysis

Hezbollah is an organic part of the IRGC-QF, so its purported desire to distance itself from Iran would only mean its end.

According to recent media reports, some Israeli officials and military assessments have concluded that Hezbollah is trying to undo its reputation as an “Iranian puppet.” Such claims do not necessarily indicate that the terrorist group seeks actual independence from Tehran; if anything, their relationship has become closer than ever in the past few years. Rather, the reports suggest that both partners are trying to sequester Hezbollah from Iran’s brewing regional conflict with Israel.

BIGGER ROLE, GREATER DEPENDENCE

Since Hezbollah first intervened in the Syria war, its identity has been altered. Its fighting force, its relation to other Shia militias, and the dynamics within its support base have all changed. Moreover, Hezbollah has taken on additional responsibilities such as recruiting, training, and leading other groups of fighters in Syria, Iraq, and Yemen. In essence, the organization has evolved into a virtual arm of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and its expeditionary Qods Force, providing the connective tissue for a growing network of Shia militias.

The accompanying challenges have proven difficult for Hezbollah’s top echelons, who are expected to train and command a fighting force with new functions and goals. As their regional role develops, they require closer and more

frequent coordination with IRGC commanders.

FROM MUGHNIYAH TO SOLEIMANI

When Hezbollah's former military commander Imad Mughniyah was assassinated in Damascus in 2008, his brother-in-law Mustafa Badreddine took his place. But when Badreddine was killed in 2016, no official appointment was made to replace him. Instead, Qods Force commander Qasem Soleimani became the default military commander for Hezbollah and other Shia militias fighting under his jurisdiction.

The IRGC's relationship with Mughniyah was very special. They knew him since he was a teenager and held him in high regard. He personally planned and executed the 1983 bombings against the U.S. embassy, Marine barracks, and other targets in Beirut, making him a symbol of the struggle against the West and Israel. Iranian decisionmakers always took his opinions into account when formulating regional policy. Today, only Hezbollah's secretary-general, Hassan Nasrallah, enjoys this privilege—none of the group's military commanders can claim such cachet.

This situation is likely attributable to the fact that Hezbollah has failed to find a commander who can match Mughniyah's skills. Not even Badreddine was able to fill his shoes; in fact, his numerous confrontations with Soleimani about Hezbollah's mission in Syria reportedly led to serious tension between the two right up until his assassination.

Afterward, Soleimani apparently decided to adopt a more hands-on approach to Hezbollah's military operations. While veteran commanders such as Ibrahim Aqil, Fuad Shukr, and Talal Hamiyah have become Soleimani's link to Hezbollah's military divisions, they do not enjoy the trust and advisory capacities that Mughniyah held. Furthermore, the group's newer commanders still lack deep experience and operational capabilities.

COMMITMENT TO KHAMENEI

The shift to more direct Iranian management began to surface a few years into the Syria war. One indicator came from recent sanctions efforts against Iran, which revealed that the country's financing to Hezbollah has increased over the past six years. Last month, the U.S. Treasury Department **imposed financial restrictions** (<https://home.treasury.gov/index.php/news/press-releases/sm0385>) on Valiollah Seif, governor of the Central Bank of Iran, accusing him of helping the IRGC covertly transfer hundreds of millions of dollars to the group. He reportedly used al-Bilad Islamic Bank in Iraq for these transfers, leading Treasury to target the institution and its top two executives, along with a liaison between the IRGC and Hezbollah.

The increased investments have had visible effects in Lebanon, where Hezbollah and its political allies recently won the parliamentary elections. By intervening in Syria and other parts of the region, Hezbollah has been paying Iran back for past favors, but it has tied itself more closely to the IRGC in the process.

For example, this March, the conservative Iranian website Farda News quoted Nasrallah saying that his organization has pledged full allegiance to Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, and that its commitment to the Iranian Supreme Leader goes beyond its obligation to the Lebanese constitution. Nasrallah even reportedly said that when Hezbollah's central committee discusses an issue, they refrain from any action if they believe Khamenei will be unsatisfied with it. While Hezbollah denies these reports, similar statements have been heard in interviews with Nasrallah's deputy, Naim Qassem, and former IRGC commander Yahya Rahim Safavi.

THE LIMITS OF PROXY WARFARE IN SYRIA

In Syria, Iran has wanted different things from Hezbollah at different times. Tehran's doctrine of proxy warfare calls for deploying foreign militias under the Qods Force's command—supported by specialized elements of Iran's

armed forces—to compete militarily against enemies, yet without triggering all-out wars that would require its full military involvement. The 2016 victory against opposition groups in Aleppo showed the strength of this doctrine in certain situations.

Since then, however, the Iranian strategy in Syria appears to have changed. With the opposition nearly defeated, the Qods Force's mission turned to establishing permanent bases all over Syria. Iran leased space in more than twenty Syrian military installations to house the IRGC's artillery, armor, drones, ballistic missiles, foreign militia proxies, and special forces units, each with its own weapons depots, runways, and missile launchers. Meanwhile, the Qods Force established a land corridor to connect its supply bases in Iran to its forces in Syria.

Yet Tehran's visible effort to entrench itself in Syria for the long term has led to **direct confrontations with Israel** (<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/irans-miscalculated-escalation-in-the-golan>), and a wider showdown would force the IRGC to go beyond the Qods Force's proxy approach. Iranian-Israeli conflict on Syrian soil could quickly escalate into open war, with Israeli forces hitting targets inside Iran and vice versa. Although Hezbollah would play an important role in such a war, its involvement would be relegated to secondary status.

In early May, IRGC missile forces in Syria fired some twenty rockets toward Israeli positions in the Golan Heights in a limited response to Israel's earlier attacks on Iranian installations in Syria. The salvo seemed at least partly intended to test Israel's response, which ended up being vast and disproportionate, hitting nearly all Qods Force installations in Syria. Introducing Hezbollah to a confrontation between regular Iranian and Israeli forces would undoubtedly heighten the chances of serious escalation—and Tehran is currently not prepared for such a conflict.

HEZBOLLAH AS THE LAST RESORT

As Syria becomes the main potential venue of Iranian-Israeli confrontation, Tehran seems to be tasking Hezbollah with establishing fuller control of Lebanon, a vital forward base for the Islamic Republic. Hezbollah has accumulated more than 100,000 rockets and missiles over the years and knows how to use them. It is capable of firing 1,200 of them per day and can accurately target almost every major population center and strategic location in Israel.

In this sense, Hezbollah is Iran's strongest foreign pawn to play against Israel—yet also its last resort. The group's hold over Lebanon cannot be sacrificed in an open confrontation with Israel at this point. Despite the potential for continued covert operations abroad, Iran will probably keep Hezbollah from retaliating militarily from Syria or Lebanon. The group is unlikely to be used directly until Iran feels it needs to send a strong message to Israel or launch a full-fledged war.

Deterring Hezbollah's involvement in the longer term would require various types of pressure. The group's power derives from its sociopolitical status in Lebanon and its organic military relationship with the IRGC. The latter is difficult to break, but it depends in part on Iran's land bridge across Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon. Cutting that route would make Hezbollah more vulnerable militarily, and make Iran more cautious about involving the group in its next foreign adventure. As for Hezbollah's domestic status, it seems **stronger than ever after the latest elections** (<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/what-does-hezbollahs-election-victory-mean-for-lebanon>), but it is still subject to internal economic and political challenges that can be exploited via outside pressure.

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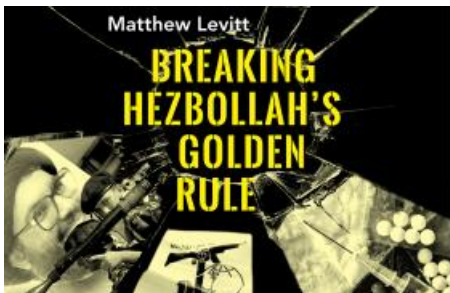
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