

# Hezbollah and Iran in Syria

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## Brief Analysis

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The sudden and surprising resignation of Lebanese prime minister Saad Hariri over the weekend, blaming Iranian interference in his country, compels us to consider this tragic dilemma. Of particular interest—and importance—is the way Iran has used Hezbollah, an intrinsic part of Lebanon’s political fabric, as a means to achieve its goals in Syria. Hassan Nasrallah’s famous statement that the road to Jerusalem passes through Syria is not new, nor is it original. Instead, it echoes the words of the Ayatollah Khomeini. Any political objective which the party seeks to achieve at the tactical political level in Lebanon—or the strategic level in Lebanon and the region—is connected to Iran and its political aspirations.

Lebanon is surely affected by the political and military developments surrounding it and is fundamentally linked to all of the developments in Syria, just as it was closely connected to the Palestinian cause. Thus, Iran’s pragmatism has succeeded, as it has placed the Palestinian cause among its priorities; it received Yasser Arafat several days after the revolution’s victory, at a time when Arafat was struggling with an Arab blockade. Iran worked to deepen those ties, especially after the Israeli invasion of Beirut in 1982. Concurrently with the onset of the Israeli invasion of Beirut, Iran escalated its military operations against Saddam Hussein’s Iraq and carried out an expansive military campaign to recover Iranian cities and regions which the Iraqi forces had seized. At the time, Iran recovered Khorramshahr and Kushk, and Khomeini invoked the slogan, “The road to Jerusalem goes through Karbala and the road to Lebanon goes through Iraq.”

The equation was clear: using dogma to achieve a political aim, whether in Iraq or by exploiting the Israeli invasion in Lebanon, in order to pave the way for Iran’s incursion, as a prelude to taking control. This control was obviously not military in nature, but instead meant establishing areas of influence through which Iran would become capable of exerting influence. To this end, Iran showered Hezbollah with every possible means of support to expand its areas of influence.

Hezbollah used many pretexts to justify entering the Syrian war alongside Bashar al-Assad. The party provided its followers with more than one rationale as it sought to convince people, in a heated environment, of the need for fighting in support of the Ba’ath party. The first reason was protecting Lebanese Shia in Syria and in those Lebanese villages subject to Syrian control due to the blurred and ill-defined borders between the two countries. The second

reason was to protect religious shrines and holy places. The third reason came under the banner of pre-emptive war, by going to kill takfirists in Syria before they came to Lebanon. This discourse continued for two years following the party's entry into the Syrian conflict. After that time, Nasrallah announced that the purpose of the intervention was to protect the regime and ensure its survival; otherwise, the fall of the regime would represent a blow to Iran's fundamental project. This position is an essential element of the party's engagement in the largest battles in Syria. Everyone remembers Hassan Nasrallah's famous statement that the road to Jerusalem passes through Aleppo, Homs, and Idlib.

Hezbollah was gained legitimacy among the Lebanese and Arabs by fighting the Israeli army. Subsequently, the Palestinian cause became a universal rationale for illegal activities which political groups sought to commit. This is exactly what Hezbollah did in Syria, announcing that the fighting there focused on opposing Israel and its agents. This slogan, in conjunction with slogans about fighting takfirists, extremists, and terrorists, served to mobilize soldiers and convince the Shia community of the necessity and sacredness of the war, which justified the heavy losses Hezbollah incurred.

Politically, Hezbollah has had a plan since its founding which aims to export revolution. This means that Iran seeks to extend its control to Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon. This is actively happening today, with Syria as its geographic center. This was made especially apparent by the battles which the Iranian forces and factions loyal to it, led by Hezbollah, launched on the Syrian-Iraqi border to ensure an open passage linking Teheran to Beirut, via Iraq and Syria.

Iran focused on the Palestinian cause to achieve its political and expansionist aspirations. It is true that most of the slogans advocating velayat-e faqih were demagogical and ideological, even though Iran's approach to political developments was largely pragmatic, whether in its global and strategic dimension or its relationship with the international community. As for the latter, Iran continued spreading slogans antagonistic to the United States by describing it as the "Great Satan," while signing the nuclear agreement. There is also the strained political dimension relating to various arenas. In Lebanon, for example, Iran found itself forced to temporarily combat the Syrian regime, during which time there were violent battles between Iran's subsidiary, Hezbollah, and Syria's Amal Movement. Another instance came thereafter, when Iran found itself forced to normalize relations with Saudi Arabia in Lebanon, by entering into political negotiations with Lebanese factions belonging to two different axes, the Iranian axis and the Saudi-American axis.

Just as Iran exploited the American invasion to further infiltrate Iraq, it does not conceal its desire to create a crescent in the Arab region, and it has begun achieving that in practice and announcing it. Nasrallah personally did so in his speech on Jerusalem Day—which falls on the last Friday of Ramadan—when he proclaimed that the Iranian axis had prevailed in the region. Owing to the victories in Syria and along the Syrian-Iraqi border, Hezbollah believed that it would be easy to move fighters from Iraq to Syria, just as it had been to move fighters from Lebanon to Syria. Consequently, the message that Hezbollah wants to deliver is that the borders have collapsed and that there are new rules of engagement, to the detriment of Israel and the Arabs. From Iran's perspective, the new borders extend from southern Lebanon—and more specifically Naqoura—to Mount Hermon in southern Syria, east towards the Iraqi border, and north towards Lebanon's Bekaa Valley, the countryside surrounding Damascus, and finally reaching Homs, in central Syria.

Today, Iran is announcing its military victories. It succeeded in exploiting the international community's lack of vision and fragmentation, as well as the staggering complexity of international relations in the Middle East. In doing so it has changed the maps and redrawn the borders, not legally, but demographically and militarily. Iran's goals go beyond having wide political influence in the region, to achieving economic and commercial interests.

In Lebanon, Iran's regions of geographic influence are vastly expanding to include large oil blocks in the

Mediterranean, particularly in the south. Politically, Iran's say in decisions will allow it to make numerous gains in the oil and energy sectors. For instance, Iran is seeking submissions of tenders for oil exploration, a process begun by the Lebanese government. In Syria, Iran is eager to fight in the center of the country, and specifically Homs, an area rich in phosphate fields. Simultaneously, it wants to secure its strategic plan, providing ample oil wealth, from central to northern Syria and to Iraq. The first Iranian objective towards expanding its political control consists of exporting Iranian oil to Europe via pipelines from Basra to Lebanon and realizing the Shia crescent. As for the other objectives, they will progressively emerge given the continued absence of any clear Arab or American strategy to counter Teheran and curb its influence. ❖

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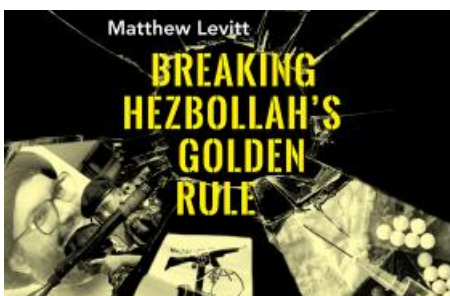
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