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To Stop the New Hezbollah, Think Regionally

by [Hanin Ghaddar](#)

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Brief Analysis

Despite setbacks in Syria, and anxieties over a potential future conflict with Israel, the group has substantially widened its reach in recent years.

Israel and Hezbollah have traded increasingly heated rhetoric of late, prompting many in the region to remark on the possibility of a new war between the antagonists. Indeed, this prospect will grow more likely as long as Hezbollah continues to build up its arsenal from Iran's advanced weapons, and continues to constitute a threat to Israel from Lebanon's border and from the Syrian-held sector of the Golan Heights.

Indeed, since Hezbollah's last war with Israel, in 2006, the group has expanded its reach substantially. No longer just a Lebanese militia, Hezbollah has become deeply involved in the region, mainly in Syria and Iraq, and to some degree in Yemen, and it has consolidated its power within Lebanese state institutions. Therefore, plans and policies intended to contain Hezbollah's threat both within Lebanon and beyond -- whether via military or diplomatic means -- should not ignore the group's new regional role.

Furthermore, Hezbollah today is a key player in Iran's regional army, and efforts to curtail the group's influence only on the domestic Lebanese front will therefore be inadequate. Such efforts must instead be part of a comprehensive regional strategy aimed at checking all Iran's Shiite militias.

The Stakes in Lebanon

Alongside the confrontational rhetoric coming from both Israeli and Hezbollah officials, Israel has been conducting military strikes against Hezbollah's arms shipments inside Syria -- mainly those purported to

include advanced weapons. Hezbollah has not retaliated for any of these strikes, including the latest, on April 27, when Israel hit an arms depot in Damascus where Hezbollah was suspected of storing Iran-supplied weapons. Over the past several years, such Israeli strikes have become more frequent, indicating an increasingly assertive stance against Hezbollah's attempts to gain advanced weapons in Syria. But, excepting two minor incidents along the Lebanese border in 2014 and 2015, Hezbollah has only reacted to the Israeli attacks with threatening words.

Hezbollah has been guarded for two main reasons: (1) It prefers to avoid starting a war with Israel while most of its fighting forces are embroiled in other regional wars. (2) It wants to maintain the political capital it has amassed on Lebanon's political scene and in its state institutions over the past eleven years of relative peace. During these years, Lebanon's Shiite community has changed its outlook and lifestyle to accommodate Hezbollah's expanded role. Therefore, the group has much to lose in Lebanon.

In particular, Lebanon's Shiite community, including its Hezbollah component, has adopted a mindset governed by the notion that quiet is good for business. Recently, many businesses have emerged in Shiite strongholds such as Dahiya, a southern suburb of Beirut, and across southern Lebanon. In every city and major town, hotels, restaurants, and modern-style cafés have opened up, and Shiite business interests from inside and outside Lebanon have invested in such ventures.

Hezbollah recognizes that the rising war talk does not mesh well with these business developments. And should a war occur, Lebanese know they will receive much reduced reconstruction funds and donations from the Gulf Arab states, as compared to after the 2006 war, given heightened Sunni-Shiite tensions.

More important still, in contrast to 2006, this time the Shiite community will be Hezbollah's responsibility. Whereas after the last war Shiites fleeing Dahiya and their southern Lebanese residences were welcomed by other Lebanese communities or Syrian families, this time such possibilities will be far narrower, especially considering the war in Syria and the sharpened sectarian conflict that has accompanied it -- a conflict Hezbollah has itself fueled.

All such factors explain Hezbollah's lack of retaliation for Israel strikes and desire to avoid a future war. For its part, Israel knows that strikes on Hezbollah's arsenal in Lebanon could prompt a different response and thus has steered clear of such provocations. This delicate balance has kept war at bay so far -- but mistakes do happen, especially in such a freighted scene, and miscalculations could lead to war.

Hezbollah as a Regional Army

However skittish it may be over a future war with Israel, Hezbollah continues to expand its regional mission. Along with its Iranian sponsor, the Lebanese group is accumulating influence among Shiite communities across the Middle East. Its activity in Syria and elsewhere, meanwhile, has endowed the group with advancing military capabilities. While Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps still serves as a supervisory entity, Hezbollah, which has become Iran's leading Arab Shiite force, is itself training and leading Iraqi, Syrian, Pakistani, Afghani, and Yemeni Shiite militias. Indeed, as Iran's role in the region grows, so does that of Hezbollah.

Moreover, although sustaining heavy personnel losses in Syria and facing [challenges associated with its support base in Lebanon](#), Hezbollah can still make the case to supporters and potential fighters that the group's new regional role will deliver heretofore-unknown Shiite political power and unity. For Hezbollah opponents, the group's broadened regional footprint makes countering it a more complex undertaking than in the past. Likewise, a war in Lebanon would not necessarily affect its assets elsewhere in the region.

To confront Hezbollah today, the United States, Israel, and its Arab adversaries must confront and contain the group's plans and role in Syria, Iraq, and elsewhere in the region, and within the context of other associated Shiite militias. The group derives much power, to be sure, from both its expanded regional position and its ties to such

militias.

Here, a major step forward would entail unseating Syrian president Bashar al-Assad from power and thereby challenging Iran's "[useful Syria](#)." Hezbollah and Iranian officials have repeatedly justified their involvement in Syria by citing the request by Assad and his government for such assistance. This excuse has allowed Iran and Hezbollah to take over swaths of land between Damascus and the Lebanese border, and toward southern Syria, where the group has engaged in aggressive demographic manipulation to guarantee Shiite control and legitimize its presence.

According to media reports, following a U.S. strike against pro-Assad forces at the al-Tanf base in Syria, Iran will be sending three thousand Hezbollah forces to the al-Tanf region, situated along Syria's borders with Jordan and Iraq. If Iran succeeds in establishing control over this region, its proxies will enjoy free movement between the eastern Syrian towns of Tadmur (ancient Palmyra) and Deir al-Zour and Baghdad. In addition, Hezbollah and other Shiite militias will be able to block the U.S.-supported rebels in al-Tanf from reaching Deir al-Zour.

Conclusions

Iran will keep sending troops to Syria whenever needed -- as long as the war is distant from the Iranian border. And Hezbollah will not leave Syria unless Iran's mission is completed. However, an increased U.S. presence in Syria is complicating, although not yet preventing, this mission. According to the *Guardian*, Iran has changed the course of its land bridge after "officials in Iraq and Tehran feared a growing U.S. military presence in north-eastern Syria had made its original path unviable." Despite such apparent American successes, a stronger military approach is insufficient if unaccompanied by a comprehensive strategy that involves all pertinent regional actors.

"Constant transformation" is an apt descriptor for Hezbollah's role and scope, for Hezbollah's fighters, and for the region's broader demographics. Any strategy to confront Hezbollah must take into account such transformation and focus on its social and economic as well as military dimensions.

Hanin Ghaddar, a veteran Lebanese journalist and researcher, is the inaugural Friedmann Visiting Fellow at The Washington Institute. ❖



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