

# A Proxy for Iran

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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**T**he CIPHER Brief sat down with Matt Levitt, former deputy assistant secretary for intelligence and analysis at the Treasury Department, to discuss Hezbollah's roles in Lebanon and Syria and as a proxy for Iran. According to Levitt, despite losses in Syria, Hezbollah remains a threat to Israeli security and U.S. interests in the Middle East, particularly due to an expected increase in financial support from Iran. "A newly enriched Hezbollah should be expected to act more aggressively at home and abroad, challenging less-militant parties across the Lebanese political spectrum and boosting its destabilizing activities outside Lebanon," he says.

**The CIPHER Brief:** How did Hezbollah emerge as an influential group in Lebanon?

**Matt Levitt:** Hezbollah was founded in the early 1980s as part of an Iranian effort to aggregate a variety of militant Lebanese Shi'a groups under one roof. On the one hand, Hezbollah was the outgrowth of a complex and bloody civil war, during which Lebanon's historically marginalized Shi'a Muslims attempted to assert economic and political power for the first time. Hezbollah was also a byproduct of Israel's effort to dismantle the Palestine Liberation Organization by invading southern Lebanon in 1982.

Shortly after the Israeli invasion, approximately 1,500 IRGC (Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps) advisers established a base in the Bekaa Valley as part of its goal to train Hezbollah members and export the Islamic Revolution to the Arab world. Hezbollah is now one of the most dominant political parties in Lebanon, as well as a social and religious movement catering first and foremost (though not exclusively) to Lebanon's Shi'a community.

**TCB:** From where does Hezbollah receive its funding?

**ML:** Over the past three decades, Hezbollah has remained Iran's proxy. The Pentagon estimates that Tehran provides Hezbollah with weapons and spends up to \$200 million a year funding the group's activities, including its media channel, al-Manar, and its operations abroad. By other accounts, Iran may provide Hezbollah with as much as \$350 million a year. Since its inception, Hezbollah has leveraged worldwide networks of members and supporters to provide financial support. Through these networks, the group has been able to raise funds, procure weapons and dual-use items, obtain false documents, and more. It's also engaged in abuse of charity and takes money from deep-pocketed major donors, but more than anything else, Hezbollah is involved in the highest amount of criminal activity amongst terrorist groups.

**TCB:** What role does Hezbollah play in the Lebanese government? What is Hezbollah's current level of influence in Lebanon?

**ML:** Hezbollah first entered Lebanese politics in 1992, when it won 12 of 128 seats in Parliament. By 2005 Hezbollah had won all twenty-three parliamentary seats representing southern Lebanon. Since 2011, the Lebanese government has been dominated by Hezbollah and its coalition partners, making it the de facto ruling party in Lebanon.

However, for a group that has always portrayed itself as standing up for the dispossessed in the face of injustice and that has always tried to downplay its sectarian and pro-Iranian identities, supporting a brutal Alawite regime in Syria against the predominantly Sunni Syrian opposition risks shattering its long-cultivated image. Lebanon is deeply divided along congressional and sectarian lines, so when Hezbollah fights against Sunnis abroad, it undermines its own ability to navigate domestic Lebanese politics.

**TCB:** Is Hezbollah currently viewed as more of a political movement or as a terrorist organization both at home and abroad? How does Hezbollah split its resources between its terrorist and political activities?

**ML:** Hezbollah engages in political, social, military, criminal, and terrorist activities all at the same time. Once limited to jockeying for political power in Lebanon and fighting Israel, the group is now a regional player engaged in conflicts far beyond its historical area of operations, often in cooperation with Iran. As a result, Hezbollah has become increasingly marginalized both domestically and internationally. According to senior State Department officials, while "Hezbollah attempts to portray itself as a natural part of Lebanon's political system and a defender of Lebanese interests...its actions demonstrate otherwise."

It would be a grave mistake to try and argue that there is a distinction between Hezbollah's political wing and its military branch. In the words of Hezbollah's Deputy Secretary-General Naim Qassem, speaking in October 2012: "We don't have a military wing and a political one; we don't have Hezbollah on one hand and the resistance party on the other...Every element of Hezbollah, from commanders to members as well as our various capabilities, are in the service of the resistance, and we have nothing but the resistance as a priority."

**TCB:** What toll has the Syrian civil war taken on Hezbollah?

**ML:** Hezbollah has lost more fighters in battles against Sunni rebels in Syria since 2012 than it has in all its battles and wars with Israel. It is not just a question of numbers but of losing key leaders. For a group founded on the basis of the "resistance" against Israel, Hezbollah has to cope with the difficult reality that it has lost well over 1,000 fighters in battles against fellow Arabs and Muslims, not Israelis. The group is seen throughout the region as a sectarian weapon in Iran's arsenal. It is not a resistance force fighting occupation but a force supporting an occupation in Syria. It is a telling turn of events when the group's biggest security problem comes not from Israel but from Syria.

**TCB:** How could the Iran deal impact Hezbollah moving forward?

**ML:** For about 18 months prior to the nuclear deal, Iran had cut back its financial support to Hezbollah -- a collateral benefit of the unprecedented international sanctions regime targeting Iran's nuclear program, as well as the fall in oil prices. However, in April 2015, Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah noted that even under sanctions, Iran funded its allies and anticipated that a now "rich and powerful Iran, which will be open to the world" would be able to do even more.

A newly enriched Hezbollah should be expected to act more aggressively at home and abroad, challenging less-militant parties across the Lebanese political spectrum and boosting its destabilizing activities outside Lebanon. And at a time when Iran may not want to be seen engaging directly in activities that could undermine the nuclear deal, the likelihood increases that it will rely still more on the reasonably deniable activities of its primary terrorist proxy organization, Hezbollah.

*Matthew Levitt is the Fromer-Wexler Fellow and director of the Stein Program on Counterterrorism and Intelligence*

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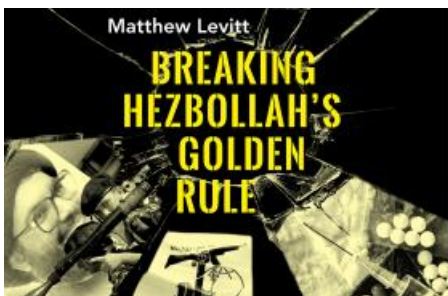
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