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# Waking Up the Neighbors: How Regional Intervention Is Transforming Hezbollah

by [Matthew Levitt](#)

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**Given the depth of its involvement in Syria, Iraq, and Yemen, Hezbollah will likely continue to head an emerging Shiite foreign legion bent on expanding Iranian influence across the region.**

**T**he war in Syria has dramatically changed Hezbollah. 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. Underscoring this strategic shift, Hezbollah has transferred key personnel previously stationed near the Israel-Lebanon border to a newly established Syrian command and to outposts even further abroad, in Iraq and Yemen.

Initially, Hezbollah Secretary-General Hassan Nasrallah resisted dispatching his fighters to Syria to back President Bashar al-Assad, despite repeated requests from Iranian leaders, in particular Quds Force Commander Qassem Soleimani. Like some other Hezbollah leaders, Nasrallah feared that engaging in Syria would undermine the group's position in Lebanon by associating Hezbollah -- Lebanon's primary Shiite party -- with a repressive Iranian-allied government butchering a Sunni-majority population. But Nasrallah reportedly acquiesced after receiving an appeal from the Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. Iran, Khamenei made clear, expected Hezbollah to support Assad's grip on power. As a result, Hezbollah's operational shift to Syria and beyond has transformed the group from a Lebanese party focused on domestic politics into a regional sectarian force acting at Iran's behest across the Middle East.

## AN ORGANIZATIONAL SHIFT

**T**he strongest indicators of Hezbollah's transformation are structural. Since 2013, the group has added two new commands -- the first on the Lebanese-Syrian border, the second within Syria itself -- to its existing bases in southern and eastern Lebanon. This startling reorganization points to a serious commitment to civil conflicts well beyond Lebanon's borders.

In establishing its new presence in Syria, Hezbollah has transferred key personnel from its traditionally paramount Southern Command, along Lebanon's border with Israel. Mustafa Badreddine, the head of Hezbollah's foreign terrorist operations, began coordinating Hezbollah military activities in Syria in 2012 and now heads the group's Syrian command. Badreddine is a Hezbollah veteran implicated in the 1983 bombing of U.S. barracks in Beirut, the 2005 assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri, and terrorist bombings in Kuwait, among other attacks. His appointment is the strongest sign Hezbollah can give of its commitment to Syria's civil war. Other personnel assignments include Abu Ali Tabtabai, a longtime Hezbollah commander. He was transferred from a position in southern Lebanon to Hezbollah's Syria command, where he served as one of Badreddine's senior officers, overseeing many of the highly trained troops formerly under his control in Lebanon. Hezbollah's focus on the Syrian conflict extends to the top of the organization as well: Nasrallah has directed the group's activities in Syria since at least September 2011, when he reportedly began meeting Assad in Damascus to coordinate Hezbollah's contributions to the country's civil war. Indeed, the organization's intense focus on the Syrian conflict was the main reason for its blacklisting by the U.S. Department of the Treasury in 2012. Today, there are between some 6,000 and 8,000 Hezbollah operatives in Syria.

But joining the fight in Syria did not come without risks: Hezbollah has suffered some serious personnel losses as a result, both in Lebanon and in Syria. Hassan al-Laquis, Hezbollah's chief military procurement officer, was assassinated in Beirut in December 2013. Although the prime suspects were Israeli agents, Sunni extremists retaliating against Hezbollah's support for the Assad government have not been ruled out. And numerous high-ranking officers, including Fawzi Ayub, a longtime member of Hezbollah's foreign terrorist wing, have reportedly been killed in Syria in clashes with anti-Assad rebels. By the first half of 2015, Hezbollah was suffering between 60 and 80 weekly casualties in Syria's Qalamoun region alone. The deaths of Hezbollah members of Ayub's stature in Syria -- and the sheer number of militants killed and wounded there -- demonstrate the group's seriousness in defending the Assad regime. Its tolerance for such losses, on the other hand, reveals that Hezbollah increasingly considers the Syrian conflict an existential fight -- for its domestic standing in Lebanon, on the one hand, and for the position of Shiite forces in Syria's bitter sectarian conflict, on the other.

Even as it deepens its activities in Syria, Hezbollah continues to aid Shiite militias in Iraq, sending small numbers of skilled trainers to fight the Islamic State (also known as ISIS) and defend Shiite shrines there. According to the U.S. Department of the Treasury, Hezbollah has also invested in commercial front organizations to support its operations in Iraq. Hezbollah member Adham Tabaja, the majority owner of the Lebanon-based real estate and construction firm Al-Inmaa Group for Tourism Works, has exploited the firm's Iraqi subsidiaries to fund Hezbollah, with the assistance of Kassem Hejeij, a Lebanese businessman tied to Hezbollah, and Husayn Ali Faour, a member of Hezbollah's overseas terrorism unit.

As in Iraq, Hezbollah has dispatched only a small number of highly skilled trainers and fighters to Yemen. But as in Syria, the prominence of the operatives that Hezbollah has sent there demonstrates the importance the group attributes to the country's ongoing civil conflict. Khalil Harb, a former special operations commander and a close adviser to Nasrallah, oversees Hezbollah's activities in Yemen -- managing the transfer of funds to the organization within the country -- and travels frequently to Tehran to coordinate Hezbollah activities with Iranian officials. Given his experience working with other terrorist organizations, his close relations with Iranian and Hezbollah leaders,

and his expertise in special operations and training, appointing Harb to work in Yemen no doubt made a great deal of sense to Hezbollah.

Harb, however, is not the most senior operative dispatched to Yemen by Hezbollah. In the spring of 2015, Hezbollah sent Abu Ali Tabtabai, the senior commander formerly stationed in Syria, to upgrade the group's training program for Yemen's Houthi rebels, which reportedly involves schooling them in guerilla tactics. "Sending in Tabtabai [to Yemen] is a sign of a major Hezbollah investment and commitment," an Israeli official told me. "The key question is how long someone of Tabtabai's stature will stay."

## A LONG-TERM COMMITMENT

In Syria and elsewhere, deadly proxy conflicts -- between Saudi Arabia and other Sunni Gulf states, on the one hand, and Iran on the other -- have been complicated by the dangerous overlay of sectarianism. Sunni and Shiite states and their clients seem to view the region's wars as part of a long-term, existential struggle between their sects. Indeed, the war in Syria is now being fought on two parallel fronts: one between the Assad regime and the Syrian opposition, and the other between Sunni and Shiite communities over the threat each perceives from the other. Similar dynamics define the wars in Iraq and Yemen. Factional conflict might be negotiable, but sectarian war is almost certainly not.

Hezbollah's involvement in the war in Syria may have originally focused on supporting the Assad regime, but it now considers that war an existential battle for the future of the region, and for Hezbollah's place in it. As a result, the group's regional focus will likely continue for the foreseeable future. Together with other Iranian-backed militias, Hezbollah will continue to head an emerging Shiite foreign legion working both to defend Shiite communities and to expand Iranian influence across the region.

Even as it juggles its involvement in the conflicts of Iraq, Syria, and Yemen, Hezbollah must also balance its occasionally clashing ideological and political goals elsewhere. Hezbollah's adherence to the Iranian doctrine of *velayat-e faqih* (guardianship of the jurist), which holds that a Shiite cleric should serve as the supreme head of government, binds the group to the decrees of Iranian clerics. But this complicates Hezbollah's other commitments to the Lebanese state, Lebanon's Shiite community, and Shiites abroad, because the interests of Iran and Lebanon do not always converge. Hezbollah has long navigated these conflicting obligations with skill, but it will become increasingly difficult to do so as the group's priorities take it further afield from Beirut. Indeed, Lebanon is deeply divided along confessional and sectarian lines, so when Hezbollah fights against Sunnis abroad, it undermines its own ability to navigate domestic Lebanese politics.

Meanwhile, Hezbollah's intimate cooperation with Iran's Quds Force in Syria is drawing it still closer into Tehran's orbit, and thus deeper into the region's ongoing conflicts. "We shouldn't be called Party of God," one Hezbollah commander told the *Financial Times* in May. "We're not a party now, we're international. We're in Syria, we're in Palestine, we're in Iraq, and we're in Yemen. We are wherever the oppressed need us...Hezbollah is the school where every freedom-seeking man wants to learn."

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