

Hizb Allah's Gambit in Syria

By Matthew Levitt and Aaron Y. Zelin

SPEAKING IN LATE May 2013, Hizb Allah Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah declared that the battle in Syria was Hizb Allah's fight: "We will continue along the road, bear the responsibilities and the sacrifices. This battle is ours, and I promise you victory."¹ To that end, Lebanese Hizb Allah went "all-in" fighting alongside Bashar al-Assad regime loyalists and Iranian revolutionary guardsmen against Syrian rebels. The impact of Hizb Allah's involvement has been significant, as was seen most clearly in the battle for Qusayr in May-June 2013, where Hizb Allah gunmen reportedly fought house to house, suffered losses, and played the decisive role in turning the tide against anti-Assad rebels who ultimately lost the town. That battle also laid bare the myth that Hizb Allah was not fighting in Syria.

This article identifies Hizb Allah's strategic calculus for joining the fight in Syria. First, it contextualizes Hizb Allah's historical connection to the Sayyida Zaynab shrine in Damascus since it is utilized heavily in Hizb Allah's propaganda. It then probes Hizb Allah's military involvement as well as its training advisory role with new militias. It finds that Hizb Allah is heavily involved in Syria not only to help its patrons in Damascus and Tehran, but also to stave off an existential crisis in Lebanon if the Syrian rebels were to achieve victory.

Hizb Allah's Historical Ties to the Sayyida Zaynab Shrine

Although Hizb Allah has admitted to fighting in Syria, it initially insisted that it was only either defending ethnic Lebanese living on the Syrian side of the border, or protecting Shi'a shrines, specifically the Sayyida Zaynab in southern Damascus. These defensive narratives used by Hizb Allah and its allies in Iran and Iraq have dominated their propaganda in the past two years.²

1 Hassan Nasrallah, "Words on Eid al-Muqawama and the Liberation," al-Manar, May 25, 2013.

2 Phillip Smyth, "Hezbollah's Fallen Soldiers," *Foreign*

While the Sayyida Zaynab shrine is indeed a major Shi'a pilgrimage site, Hizb Allah has more than just spiritual ties to the shrine. As early as the 1980s, Hizb Allah used the site as a place to identify potential militant recruits. For Saudi Shi'a recruits in particular, the Sayyida Zaynab shrine served as a transfer hub and a cover for travel between Saudi Arabia and training camps in Lebanon or Iran.³

Evidence of the Sayyida Zaynab shrine's operational significance to Hizb Allah emerged in the context of the FBI investigation into the 1996 Khobar Towers bombing that killed 19 U.S. Air Force personnel and wounded another 372 Americans.⁴ Five of the Khobar Towers conspirators were recruited in Damascus, according to the findings of U.S. investigators, most at the Sayyida Zaynab shrine. When Abdallah al-Jarash was recruited at the site, he was told that the goal of this "Saudi Hizb Allah" group was "to target foreign interests, American in particular, in Saudi Arabia and elsewhere."⁵ Later, at least one of the operatives recruited at Sayyida Zaynab, Ali al-Marhoum, would return to Saudi Arabia to recruit more operatives.⁶

Just days before the bombing, several of the conspirators met in Damascus at the Sayyida Zaynab shrine to confer one last time with senior leadership of Saudi Hizb Allah.⁷ Abdel Karim al-Nasser, the group's chief, reportedly went over the operational details of the bomb plot with the men to be sure everyone knew their roles.⁸

Hizb Allah Joins the Fray

When did Hizb Allah join the fight in Syria? Hizb Allah, Nasrallah insisted in May 2013, had not intervened in the fighting in Syria until just several months earlier. While "tens of thousands of [Sunni] fighters" joined

Policy, May 22, 2013.

3 Toby Matthiesen, "Hizbullah al-Hijaz: A History of The Most Radical Saudi Shi'a Opposition Group," *Middle East Journal* 64:2 (2010): pp. 179-197.

4 *The Khobar Towers Bombing Incident* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. House National Security Committee, 1996).

5 *U.S.A. v. Ahmed Mughassil et al.*, Eastern District of Virginia, 2001.

6 Ibid.

7 Ibid.

8 Ibid.

the fight in Syria, Nasrallah lamented, the international community only complained about foreign intervention in Syria when "a small group from Hizb Allah entered Syria."⁹

Yet Hizb Allah's destabilizing activities in Syria date almost to the beginning of the country's uprising in 2011. These activities, as a journalist in Lebanon wrote, have "torn away the party's mask of virtue."¹⁰ Within weeks of the uprising, Nasrallah himself called on all Syrians to stand by the al-Assad regime.¹¹ As reports emerged in May 2011 that Iran's Qods Force was helping the Syrian regime crack down on antigovernment demonstrators, Hizb Allah denied playing "any military role in Arab countries."¹² By the following month, however, Syrian protesters were heard chanting not only for al-Assad's downfall, but also against Iran and Hizb Allah.¹³ Video footage showed protesters burning posters of Nasrallah.¹⁴ According to a senior Syrian defense official who defected from the regime, Syrian security services were unable to handle the uprising on their own. "They didn't have decent snipers or equipment," he explained. "They needed qualified snipers from Hizb Allah and Iran."¹⁵

Over time, Hizb Allah increasingly struggled to conceal its on-the-ground support for the al-Assad regime. In August 2012, the U.S. Treasury Department blacklisted Hizb Allah, already on the department's terrorism list, for providing support to the al-Assad regime.¹⁶ Since the beginning of the rebellion, the U.S. Treasury

9 Nasrallah, "Words on Eid al-Muqawama and the Liberation."

10 Michael Young, "Syria Widens Hezbollah's Contradictions," al-Arabiya, October 4, 2012.

11 "Hezbollah Chief Calls on Syrians to Stand by Assad Regime," *Los Angeles Times*, May 26, 2011.

12 Joby Warrick, "Iran Reportedly Aiding Syrian Crackdown," *Washington Post*, May 27, 2011; Thomas El-Basha, "Nasrallah Blasts Obama, Urges Arabs Withdraw Peace Initiative," *Daily Star* [Beirut], May 25, 2011.

13 "Syrian Protestors Turn on Iran and Hezbollah," *France 24*, June 3, 2011.

14 Ibid.

15 Nate Wright and James Hidler, "Syrian Regime 'Importing Snipers' for Protests," *Australian*, January 26, 2012.

16 "Treasury Designates Hizballah Leadership," U.S. Treasury Department, September 13, 2012.

Department contended, Hizb Allah had been providing “training, advice and extensive logistical support to the Government of Syria’s increasingly ruthless efforts” against the opposition.¹⁷ Most funerals for Hizb Allah members killed in the fighting were quiet affairs, as Hizb Allah tried to conceal the extent of its activities in Syria; however, news of its involvement began to emerge. In August 2012, Hizb Allah parliamentarians reportedly attended the funeral of military commander Musa Ali Shehimi who “died while performing his jihadi duty.”¹⁸ A few weeks later, another Hizb Allah military commander, Ali Hussein Nassif, was killed in Syria, along with two bodyguards, also “while performing his jihadi duties,” according to a Hizb Allah newspaper.¹⁹

Hizb Allah’s “resistance” rhetoric notwithstanding, U.S. officials informed the UN Security Council in October 2012 that “the truth is plain to see: Nasrallah’s fighters are now part of Assad’s killing machine.”²⁰ Two months later, a UN report confirmed Hizb Allah members were fighting on behalf of the al-Assad government.²¹ Amid increasing concern that the struggle in Syria would engulf the region in conflict, Hizb Allah established training camps near Syrian chemical weapons depots in November 2012.²² According to a senior U.S. official, “The fear these weapons could fall into the wrong hands is our greatest concern.”²³

Hizb Allah’s Strategic Interests in Syria

Hizb Allah has multiple identities, with several and sometimes competing goals and interests. It is one of the 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. Hizb Allah is also Lebanon’s largest militia, the only Lebanese militia to keep its weapons and rebrand its armed elements as an “Islamic resistance” in response to the terms of the 1989 Taif Accord, which ended the Lebanese Civil War.

While the group’s various elements are intended to complement one another, the reality is often messier. In part, this is due to the compartmentalization of Hizb Allah’s covert activities. It is also, however, a result of the group’s multiple identities—Lebanese, pan-Shi`a, pro-Iranian—and the group’s various strategic interests tied to these different identities. Nowhere has this been starker than in Syria, where the group has turned the weapons it has long maintained were solely intended for “resistance” against Israel toward fellow Muslims to the east. Moreover, by engaging in sectarian violence in Syria, Hizb Allah threatens the stability of the fractured and deeply divided sectarian society in Lebanon. Ignoring the Lebanese government’s stated policy of non-intervention in Syria, Hizb Allah has dragged Lebanon into a sectarian war. Recognizing this, Nasrallah even suggested Lebanese could fight each other in Syria, just not in Lebanon:

We renew our call for sparing Lebanon any internal clash or conflict. We disagree over Syria. You fight in Syria; we fight in Syria; then let’s fight there. Do you want me to be more frank? Keep Lebanon aside. Why should we fight in Lebanon? There are different viewpoints, different visions, and different evaluation of obligations. Well so far so good. However, let’s spare Lebanon fighting, struggle and bloody confrontations.²⁴

Yet Hizb Allah’s fight has not limited itself to the Syrian side of the border. Nor will Hizb Allah withdraw from its support of the al-Assad regime. Hizb Allah sees at stake a number of interlocking strategic interests so critical to the group that Nasrallah is willing to risk further undermining

Hizb Allah’s standing in Lebanon and the region.

Syria has been Hizb Allah’s reliable patron for years, a relationship that only grew deeper under the rule of Bashar al-Assad.²⁵ While Hafiz al-Assad used Hizb Allah as a proxy, he also kept the group at arm’s length and at times employed force to keep it in line. In 1988, for example, Hafiz al-Assad’s Syria issued a warrant for the arrest of Imad Mughniyyeh, the head of Hizb Allah’s Islamic Jihad Organization.²⁶ By 2010, however, Bashar al-Assad was not just allowing the transshipment of Iranian arms to Hizb Allah through Syria, but was reportedly providing Hizb Allah long-range Scud rockets from its own arsenal.²⁷ Nasrallah explained the nature of Hizb Allah’s alliance with Syria:

I frankly say that Syria is the backbone of the resistance, and the support of the resistance. The resistance cannot sit with hands crossed while its backbone is held vulnerable and its support is being broken or else we will be stupid. Stupid is he who stands motionless while watching death, the siege and conspiracy crawling towards him. He would be stupid then. However, the responsible, rational man acts with absolute responsibility.²⁸

Hizb Allah’s support of the al-Assad regime is not due to a romantic sense of obligation. Hizb Allah is keen to make sure that air and land corridors remain open for the delivery of weapons, cash and other materials from Tehran. Until the Syrian civil war, Iranian aircraft would fly into Damascus International Airport where their cargo would be loaded onto Syrian military trucks and escorted into Lebanon for delivery to Hizb Allah.²⁹ Now, Hizb Allah is

17 Ibid.

18 Babak Dehganpisheh, “Hezbollah Increases Support for Syrian Regime, U.S. and Lebanese Officials Say,” *Washington Post*, September 26, 2012.

19 Elizabeth A. Kennedy, “Official: Hezbollah Fighters Killed in Syria,” *Daily Star*, October 2, 2012.

20 Edith M. Lederer, “US Says Hezbollah is Part of Assad’s War Machine,” *Associated Press*, October 15, 2012.

21 “Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syria Arab Republic Established Pursuant to United Nations Human Rights Council Resolutions S-17/1, 19/22 and 21/26,” UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, December 20, 2012.

22 David Sanger and Eric Schmitt, “Pentagon Says 75,000 Troops Might Be Needed to Seize Syria Chemical Arms,” *New York Times*, November 15, 2012.

23 Ibid.

24 Nasrallah, “Words on Eid al-Muqawama and the Liberation.”

25 Ze’ev Schiff, “Don’t Underestimate Assad Jr.,” *Haaretz*, August 2, 2002.

26 Magnus Ranstorp, *Hizb’Allah in Lebanon: The Politics of the Western Hostage Crisis* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1997), pp. 71, 85-86.

27 Mark Lavie, “Israeli Officials: Syria Gave Hezbollah Scuds,” *Associated Press*, April 14, 2010.

28 Nasrallah, “Words on Eid al-Muqawama and the Liberation.”

29 Yossi Melman and Sof Hashavua, “In Depth: How Iranian Weapons Go Through Syria to Hezbollah,” *Je-*

desperate to either secure the al-Assad regime, its control of the airport and the roads to Lebanon or, at a minimum, establish firm Alawite control of the coastal areas so that Hizb Allah can receive shipments through the air and seaports in Latakia, Syria. Over the past few years, FBI investigations into Hizb Allah's criminal enterprises in the United States and Europe revealed at least two cases where Hizb Allah operatives planned to procure weapons—in one instance, man-portable air defense systems (MANPADs) intended to take down Israeli aircraft—and ship them to Hizb Allah through Latakia.³⁰ In one of the cases, the European Hizb Allah procurement operative told an FBI undercover agent that the weapons would be exported to Latakia, where Hizb Allah controlled the port.³¹ Secrecy would be guaranteed there, he assured the undercover agent, because Hizb Allah could shut down all of the security cameras when the shipment arrived and no shipping paperwork would be required once the items reached Syria.³²

Hizb Allah is also fighting for the al-Assad regime in support of Iran's interests. Hizb Allah's ideological commitment to Iranian Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini's revolutionary doctrine of *wilayat al-faqih* (guardianship of the jurist), which holds that a Shi'a Islamic cleric should serve as the supreme head of government, is a key source of tension since it means that the group is simultaneously committed to the decrees of Iranian clerics, the Lebanese state, its sectarian Shi'a community within Lebanon, and fellow Shi'a abroad.

The consequences of these competing ideological drivers were clear in July 2006, when Hizb Allah dragged Israel and Lebanon into a war by crossing

rusalem Post, May 25, 2013; Phil Alito, "Iran-Lebanese Hezbollah Relationship in 2008," American Enterprise Institute, March 1, 2009.

30 Personal interview, U.S. law enforcement officials, Philadelphia, PA, March 11, 2010; "Arrests Made in Case Involving Conspiracy to Procure Weapons, Including Anti-Aircraft Missiles," U.S. Department of Justice, November 23, 2009; *U.S.A. v. Dani Nemr Tarraf et al.*, Eastern District of Pennsylvania, 2009; "Alleged Arms Dealer for Hezbollah Charged," *Philadelphia Inquirer*, November 24, 2009.

31 Ibid.

32 Ibid.

the UN-demarcated border between the two countries, killing three Israeli soldiers, and kidnapping two more in an ambush.³³ These consequences came to the fore again two years later when Hizb Allah took over West Beirut by force of arms, turning its weapons of "resistance" against fellow Lebanese citizens.³⁴ They are now more present than ever as Hizb Allah and the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) work together to shore up the al-Assad regime.

Finally, in the event that—after some 100,000³⁵ reported deaths in the civil war—Iran, Hizb Allah and Syria are unable to definitively defeat the rebels and pacify the country's Sunni majority, Hizb Allah is already establishing local proxies (as it did in Iraq just a few years earlier) through which it can maintain influence and conduct operations to undermine stability in the country in the future.³⁶

Building Proxies

Helping establish, train, and equip militias in Syria is not new for Hizb Allah. It also took part in these activities last decade during the Iraq war in coordination with the IRGC.³⁷ Hizb Allah is now employing two of these Iraqi militias—Kataib Hizb Allah and Asaib Ahl al-Haq—to build up auxiliary forces to assist the al-Assad regime.³⁸ The key militias that Hizb Allah has assisted in Syria include Jaysh al-Shabi, Liwa Abu Fadl al-Abbas (the al-Abbas

33 Greg Myre and Steven Erlanger, "Israelis Enter Lebanon After Attacks," *New York Times*, July 13, 2006.

34 Robert F. Worth and Nada Bakri, "Hezbollah Seizes Control in West Beirut," *New York Times*, May 9, 2008.

35 Albert Aji and Edith M. Lederer, "U.N.: More Than 100,000 Now Dead in Syria's Civil War," Associated Press, July 25, 2013.

36 Phillip Smyth, "From Karbala to Sayyida Zaynab: Iraqi Fighters in Syria's Shi'a Militias," *CTC Sentinel* 6:8 (2013).

37 Michael R. Gordon and Dexter Filkins, "Hezbollah Said to Help Shiite Army in Iraq," *New York Times*, November 28, 2006; Michael R. Gordon, "Hezbollah Trains Iraqis in Iran, Officials Say," *New York Times*, May 5, 2008; Thomas Joscelyn and Bill Roggio, "Iraq Frees Hezbollah Commander who Helped Mold Shia Terror Groups," *The Long War Journal*, November 16, 2012.

38 For more on these two Iraqi Shi'a militias, see "Kata'ib Hizballah," The International Centre for Political Violence and Terrorism Research, March 5, 2010; Sam Wyer, "The Resurgence of Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq," Institute for the Study of War, December 2012.

Brigade), Kataib Sayyid al-Shuhada, Liwa Zulfikar, and Liwa Ammar ibn Yasir.³⁹

Jaysh al-Shabi (The People's Army) is a U.S.-designated terrorist organization and militia force that maintains a connection to the al-Assad regime's military apparatus.⁴⁰ This highlights how the regime has adapted its forces to fight an asymmetric and irregular war. According to the U.S. Treasury Department, Jaysh al-Shabi "was created, and continues to be maintained, with support from Iran and Hizballah and is modeled after the Iranian Basij militia."⁴¹

In contrast to Jaysh al-Shabi, the other militias are not within Syria's security apparatus, but are new independent proxies allegedly established with the assistance of the IRGC and Hizb Allah.⁴² Most of these groups use the same type of iconography and narratives that Hizb Allah has put forward as it relates to the "resistance," its "jihadist duties," and protecting Shi'a shrines. Of these four militias, the al-Abbas Brigade is the most prominent and has been involved in the conflict since the fall of 2012. The al-Abbas Brigade's fighters are a combination of members of Lebanese Hizb Allah, Kataib Hizb Allah, and Asaib Ahl al-Haq.⁴³ It operates mainly in southern Damascus.⁴⁴

Kataib Sayyid al-Shuhada and Liwa Zulfikar have spawned from the al-Abbas Brigade and have been key additions to assisting the fight in southern Damascus.⁴⁵ Kataib Sayyid al-Shuhada and Liwa Zulfikar both draw fighters from Lebanese Hizb

39 See Phillip Smyth's work at www.jihadology.net/hizballah-cavalcade.

40 "Treasury Sanctions al-Nusra Front Leadership in Syria and Militias Supporting the Assad Regime," U.S. Treasury Department, December 11, 2012.

41 Ibid.

42 Smyth, "Hezbollah's Fallen Soldiers."

43 Phillip Smyth, "What is the Liwa'a Abu Fadl al-Abbas (LAFA)?: Assessing Syria's Shia 'International Brigade' Through Their Social Media Presence," *Jihadology.net*, May 15, 2013.

44 Ibid.

45 Phillip Smyth, "Kata'ib Sayyid al-Shuhada: Another Supplier of Iraqi Shia Fighters in Syria," *Jihadology.net*, June 3, 2013; Phillip Smyth, "Liwa'a Zulfikar: Birth of A New Shia Militia in Syria?" *Jihadology.net*, June 20, 2013.

Allah and Iraqi Shi'a.⁴⁶ Liwa Zulfiqar is also believed to gain some fighters from Moqtada al-Sadr's Liwa al-Yum al-Mawud.⁴⁷ Kataib Sayyid al-Shuhada was established in mid-April 2013, while Liwa Zulfiqar was established in early June 2013.⁴⁸ Unlike the al-Abbas Brigade, Kataib Sayyid al-Shuhada or Liwa Zulfiqar, Liwa Ammar ibn Yasir does not operate in southern Damascus around the area where Sayyida Zaynab is located. Instead, Liwa Ammar ibn Yasir mainly operates in rural Aleppo, even farther north than Lebanese Hizb Allah's operations in Qusayr and Homs.⁴⁹ Liwa Ammar ibn Yasir first began operating in May 2013 and has been involved in some fighting. According to their own videos or Facebook messages, 10 of their fighters have been killed so far in Syria.⁵⁰

Although Lebanese Hizb Allah and the IRGC have helped to build up these auxiliary forces, Lebanese Hizb Allah itself has also engaged in fighting against Syrian rebel forces.

Hizb Allah's Spring Offensive

A more public presence in the fight against Syrian rebels came in the spring of 2013 when martyrdom notices for Hizb Allah began to appear on their official and unofficial websites, forums, and Facebook pages.⁵¹ Based on Hizb Allah's organizational structure and disciplined messaging, it is likely that these notices were sanctioned by the leadership even though the group did not publicly admit to involvement until

46 Ibid.

47 "Tashkil 'Liwa' Zulfiqar' thani milisha li-hamayya maqam al-Sayyida Zaynab," *al-Hayat*, June 8, 2013.

48 Smyth, "Kata'ib Sayyid al-Shuhada: Another Supplier of Iraqi Shia Fighters in Syria"; Smyth, "Liwa'a Zulfiqar: Birth of A New Shia Militia in Syria?"

49 Phillip Smyth, "Liwa'a 'Ammar Ibn Yasir: A New Shia Militia Operating In Aleppo, Syria," *Jihadology.net*, July 20, 2013.

50 Substantiation of these can only be confirmed via their own videos (without other documents to solidly identify it) and Facebook statuses unlike the other groups where other sources have been able to independently confirm the content. Therefore, for now, one should be cautious when analyzing this particular data point. See Smyth, "Liwa'a 'Ammar Ibn Yasir: A New Shia Militia Operating In Aleppo, Syria."

51 While efforts to publicize these death notices only occurred in the spring of 2013, there were other signs that Hizb Allah was already fighting in Syria. This was based on funerals publicized in the press as noted earlier in the following article: Smyth, "Hezbollah's Fallen Soldiers."

May 2013. Determining the number of fighters Hizb Allah has sent to Syria is difficult to ascertain, but according to French intelligence sources some 3,000-4,000 individuals have made the trip to assist the al-Assad regime.⁵²

Hizb Allah's fighters have proven valuable to the Syrian regime. Within a few weeks of Nasrallah's public proclamation that Hizb Allah had entered the conflict, Hizb Allah delivered the strategic city of Qusayr to the regime and wrested control from the rebels. Highlighting the nature of the battle, Hizb Allah lost at least 60 men.⁵³ While there may have been a costly price, it vindicated Nasrallah's words a few weeks prior: "I say to all the honorable people, to the mujahidin, to the heroes: I have always promised you a victory and now I pledge to you a new one in Syria."⁵⁴ As a result, this feat was then sold on the Shi'a street in Lebanon as being just as important as the Israeli withdrawal from Lebanon and its "victory" over Israel in the summer of 2006.⁵⁵

Since then, Hizb Allah has moved from securing Qusayr to attempting to retake all of Homs for the regime and helping in a counteroffensive in Latakia.⁵⁶ There have also been rumors—although no evidence—that Hizb Allah has sent men to Aleppo to help with that battle as well.⁵⁷ Since the overall war in Syria appears to be in a stalemate, and Hizb Allah is fully supporting the Syrian regime and their patron in Iran, it is likely that more Hizb Allah operatives will continue to become involved over time.

52 Jana El Hassan, "4,000 Hezbollah Fighters Reach Rebel-Held Aleppo: FSA," *Daily Star*, June 4, 2013.

53 Gili Cohen, "Thousands of Hezbollah Troops Fighting, Hundreds Killed in Syria, Study Confirms," *Haaretz*, June 5, 2013.

54 Nasrallah, "Words on Eid al-Muqawama and the Liberation."

55 Phillip Smyth, "'Divine Victory' in Qusayr: Hizballah Promotes Their Success on the Web," *Jihadology.net*, June 16, 2013.

56 "Reports: Syrian Troops, Hezbollah Consolidate Gains in Homs," *Voice of America*, July 28, 2013; "More Than 10,000 Hezbollah Members Fighting in Syria, Source Says," *Agence France-Presse*, August 25, 2013.

57 Instead, it could be sending members of Liwa Ammar ibn Yasir to Aleppo. See Smyth, "Liwa'a 'Ammar Ibn Yasir: A New Shia Militia Operating In Aleppo, Syria."

Conclusion

For a group that has always portrayed itself as the vanguard standing up for the dispossessed, and has consistently downplayed its sectarian and pro-Iranian identities, supporting an Alawite regime against the predominantly Sunni Syrian opposition risked shattering a long-cultivated image. In the end, the strategic necessity of preventing the collapse of the al-Assad regime—which, if replaced by a regime representing the country's Sunni majority would, at the least, be far less friendly to Hizb Allah and possibly oppose it outright—took precedence over the need to maintain the party's image.

Whether al-Assad maintains or loses power will have a different set of consequences for Hizb Allah. If al-Assad succeeds, Hizb Allah is unlikely to enjoy the sympathy of the majority Sunni Arab world; it will be isolated and more reliant than before on Iran and the al-Assad regime. Hizb Allah will face delicate sectarian issues and consequences at home in Lebanon as the Sunni population is not likely to accept an emboldened Hizb Allah. On the other hand, if Hizb Allah fails and the Syrian regime falls, they will still be despised by the majority of the Sunni Arab world but will also lose a strategic ally and route for obtaining weapons from Iran. It is also possible that in such a desperate scenario, they could rely more on terrorist attacks due to a loss of power and prestige. Regardless, the war in Syria has exposed Hizb Allah's true strategic interests.

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