



The Transformation of Hezbollah by Its Involvement in Syria

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ON MARCH 21, 2016, Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah promised his followers in Lebanon and his allies in Syria that the organization would keep fighting for the survival of the Syrian regime. He stated that Hezbollah “went to Syria to help keep the country from falling into the hands of Daesh [as the Islamic State is also known] and al-Nusra Front...So long as we have a responsibility to be there, we will be there.”¹ Nasrallah did not stop there, also emphasizing the strong relationship between the organization and the regime: “Whether the Russians leave or stay—more than that, whether the Iranians leave or stay...we, Hezbollah...our fate and the fate of our Syrian brothers is one and indivisible.”²

FIVE YEARS HAVE PASSED since Hezbollah demonstrated its commitment to the Assad regime by entering the Syrian civil war, a commitment that appears to stand. Although their involvement was originally covert, it soon became common knowledge that the group who purports to be “the defender of Lebanon” was fighting the Syrian people on behalf of the Syrian regime. Today, Hezbollah is one of the major forces on the ground in Syria, where its fighters and commanders lead battles, train countless Shiite militia fighters, and defend the regime’s strategic bases. Indeed, Hezbollah’s Syria involvement has amounted to the largest military campaign in its history, and even as the group has achieved important achievements along the way, it has also paid a heavy price.

Many analysts have sought to measure whether Hezbollah has registered a net loss or gain through its Syria adventure—and whether the group is weaker or stronger for its troubles. On the negative side, they generally emphasize Hezbollah’s casualties and financial difficulties; on the positive, they note the group’s success in securing its strategic assets in the country, all while gaining important military experience. These existing analyses, however, only occasionally go deeper than such a topical plus-minus account. The time is thus ripe to scrutinize and expand on existing findings.

In taking on that challenge, this paper will first explain the reasoning behind the group’s involvement, followed by an examination of the scope and

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characteristics of its activity since then. The second part will look at the military education Hezbollah has gained from the conflict, on both the strategic and tactical levels, and assess its current military status. The third section will focus on how Hezbollah's domestic and regional support has been affected by the war. Finally, the piece will remark on prospects for Hezbollah's future requiring attention.

This study is based on months of research, including two trips to Israel during which the author interviewed analysts from different government and military agencies, along with multiple researchers, academics, and journalists. Interviews were conducted in Washington DC with Hezbollah experts, some of whom travel often to Lebanon, and military analysts who have followed the Syrian war closely. Other publications covering the Syrian war and Hezbollah in Lebanon have likewise contributed significantly to this study.

Understanding Hezbollah's Involvement in Syria

As the Syrian uprising that began in 2011 became a full-blown civil war, Hezbollah watched with concern from neighboring Lebanon. The Syrian regime, under President Bashar al-Assad, remained a close partner of the militant group and political party. For Hezbollah, sitting idly by as Assad was threatened by rebel forces and other extremist groups was not a viable option. On May 25, 2013, Hezbollah secretary-general Hassan Nasrallah articulated such a position when he said, "Syria is the backbone of the resistance, and the support of the resistance. The resistance cannot sit with its hands crossed while its backbone is made vulnerable and its support is being broken, or else we will be stupid."³

To understand the depth of Hezbollah's commitment to the Syrian regime, one must understand the extent to which Syria is Hezbollah's logistical lifeline. For years, weapons have been delivered through Syria to the group by air and land. Using Syria as its main transit hub, the Qods Force of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), headed by Qasem Soleimani, has made sure Hezbollah's arsenal has

grown over the years in quantity and quality.⁴ The Syrian regime itself has contributed to Hezbollah's military supply, mainly in the form of advanced antitank missiles received from Russia, along with rockets and other missiles. Reports also indicate that Hezbollah has maintained training camps in Syria and logistical bases for weapons storage.⁵ Beyond serving as a transit hub for weapons, Syria has done the same for Hezbollah fighters. Indeed, a key part of Hezbollah's training routine over the years involved traveling to Iran through the Damascus airport. Training in Iran held many advantages, including the ability to practice using larger-scale weapons, which might have attracted Israeli attention if employed in exercises based in Lebanon—where, anyway, such weapons' range would have been too great.⁶ For Hezbollah, Syria represented a safe territory for weapons storage, training, and travel. When that safety was threatened, the group needed to act.

Along with Hezbollah and Iran, Syria is part of the greater "axis of resistance," which seeks to confront Israel, along with Western and Sunni interests in the Middle East. A weaker Syria thus would mean for Hezbollah and Iran a weaker resistance coalition, and an Assad under threat called for a response. Especially grim for Hezbollah and Iran was a scenario in which Assad might be replaced with a more Western-friendly government.⁷ Here, too, it is worth noting the improvement in Hezbollah-Syria ties since Bashar al-Assad came to power after his father, Hafiz al-Assad, died in 2000. When the Syrian military was still operating in Lebanon, it sometimes clashed with Hezbollah, demonstrating the instability between the two groups.⁸ However, Hezbollah-Syria ties were aided by a close personal relationship between Nasrallah and Bashar,⁹ and these personal ties have grown even tighter since the start of the war, helping bolster Hezbollah's commitment to the regime.¹⁰

Later in the war, threats from jihadist groups—mainly, Jabhat al-Nusra and the Islamic State (IS)—provided a further incentive for Hezbollah involvement. These groups, it must be noted, initially eluded Hezbollah's attention, given that the Shiite organization

did not consider them a significant threat. Yet by 2013, Hezbollah's calculus had changed, reflected in its expanded rhetoric regarding its war objectives. Now, it sought not only to support Assad but also to defend Lebanon and the Shiite community from the jihadist-*takfiri* groups in Syria.¹¹ At this point, according to many analysts, Hezbollah was simply using such language to justify its war involvement to the Lebanese people and likely did not yet view the Sunni groups as a true threat. Today, however, some Hezbollah forces are indeed focusing on fights near the Syria-Lebanon border against Jabhat al-Nusra and IS.¹²

From Advisors to Significant Boots on the Ground

In the first two years of the Syrian war, Hezbollah's contributions were limited to covert advisory roles, training, and security for sensitive military installations and religious sites.¹³ The group did not rush headlong into the war for two reasons: First, in 2011 Assad did not seem to be in real danger. At that early stage, the Syrian military was strong enough to contain the growth of some rebel factions. Second, given the Arab Spring context of the uprising, Hezbollah did not want to be perceived as working against a popular movement. This is why Hezbollah did not feel compelled to send massive forces to Syria and kept quiet about the "advisors" who did travel to help the regime. Yet even early on, Hezbollah's military experience was instrumental in training the Syrian military and other militias loyal to the regime in guerrilla and urban warfare, and in other capabilities such as sniping and use of improvised explosive devices (IEDs).¹⁴ Hezbollah's military involvement in Syria was thus gradual, growing along with the escalation of the fighting and the increasing instability of the regime.

However, during the first half of 2013 the rebels and other extremist organizations became stronger, threatening some regime and Hezbollah strongholds and drawing a significantly larger Hezbollah presence in Syria.¹⁵ This ramped-up involvement resulted in more casualties for the group, to the extent that it

could no longer hide its activities from supporters in Lebanon. This was the context for Nasrallah's speech explaining Hezbollah's commitment to the regime.¹⁶ Given the rise of *takfiri* organizations (extremist groups seeking to "excommunicate" other Muslims), and the threat they evidently posed to Lebanon, the Hezbollah leadership now felt it had better cover for revealing its Syria involvement.¹⁷

With its "secret" now out, Hezbollah did not shy away from sending thousands of fighters to Syria. These fighters set out for multiple battlefronts, not as cannon fodder but often as experienced commanders calling the shots.¹⁸ One Syrian officer told a reporter, "Whenever we are fighting with Hezbollah, they take the command and we provide logistics."¹⁹ A young Hezbollah fighter corroborated this view: "Hezbollah manages and leads military operations; we do the bulk of the work during battles. The Syrians are sort of our GPS; they tell us about the area, its topography and the people who live there. They also fight under Hezbollah's orders."²⁰ Hezbollah's involvement in Syria became so extensive, as it remains today, that the organization needed to establish communication lines and logistical routes between various units fighting on different fronts. They thereby sent not only fighters to Syria but also technicians and other operatives with support roles.²¹ Nor did Hezbollah stop sending trainers and advisors to help prepare new cadres of Shiite and other regime-linked militias for battle.

Over the last three years, Hezbollah has been present in many of the regime's key engagements, including the battle for al-Qusayr in May 2013, the push in southern Syria in early 2015, the battle for Zabadani in summer 2015, the battle for Palmyra in March 2016, and many more. In some of these contests, Hezbollah lost dozens of fighters, raising speculation that it could recalibrate its commitment to the war.²² Yet as of now, the organization is maintaining thousands of personnel in Syria on multiple fronts, fighting alongside the regime, the IRGC, Iraqi militias, and, starting in September 2015, also the Russians.

The “Eastern Command”

Hezbollah’s deployment to Syria, coined by some in the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) as Hezbollah’s “Eastern Command,”²³ is the biggest military campaign the organization has ever managed, and as such, it involves a significant part of Hezbollah’s forces in one way or another. Most assessments regarding Hezbollah’s presence in Syria indicate that the group has between 5,000 and 8,000 fighters in the country at any given moment.²⁴ For an organization with around 45,000 fighters, 21,000 of them full time, this is a significant investment in the Syrian theater.²⁵ So who are these forces?

The full-time fighters just mentioned represent the core of Hezbollah’s military force. They undergo extensive training on numerous weapons systems, and each eventually joins a specific unit or receives advanced military training in an area such as antitank missiles, explosives, or sniping.²⁶ But Hezbollah also has part-time fighters (*taabia*), described as village guard unit members or reservists.²⁷ These reservists are usually recruited from Hezbollah’s youth movement, the Imam al-Mahdi Scouts, and they go through some military training.²⁸ Both full-time and part-time fighters serve in one of Hezbollah’s geographical units, such as the Nasr Unit, positioned between the blue line (the Israel-Lebanon border) and the Litani River;²⁹ the Badr Unit, positioned north of the Litani River;³⁰ the Haidar Unit, positioned in the Beqa Valley;³¹ or others. In recent years, Hezbollah has reportedly also fast-tracked new recruits through training regimens lasting sixty to ninety days,³² a departure for an organization accustomed to conducting lengthy background checks and training sessions to examine potential new fighters.

Beyond Hezbollah’s regular military units, the organization encompasses non-Shiite fighters who serve in the Lebanese Resistance Brigades (*Saraya al-Muqawama al-Lubnaniya*).³³ These brigades, comprising Sunnis, Druze, Christians, and others, were first recruited in 1997 to show unity against the Israeli occupation of Lebanon.³⁴ They do not go through the same extensive military training experienced by other Hezbollah forces.

According to IDF analysts, Hezbollah’s deployment to Syria consists of fighters from all Hezbollah’s units, including some from the Resistance Brigades. Moreover, Hezbollah sends not only its regular infantry but also the heads of the units themselves and their deputies, considered some of group’s most experienced commanders.³⁵

One Hezbollah entity to receive more attention than others in Syria is the Radwan Unit, reportedly named after Hezbollah’s former military commander Imad Mughniyah (aka al-Hajj Radwan), who was killed in 2008.³⁶ Radwan, which serves as Hezbollah’s special forces, has particular expertise in raids and small-unit tactics, making it very useful in the Syrian theater.³⁷ Should a new war break out between Hezbollah and Israel, this elite unit would be tasked with infiltrating Israel,³⁸ but it remains, at the moment, knee-deep in Syria. According to different reports, Radwan lost many fighters in the Zabadani battle in July 2015,³⁹ while also participating in the recent battle for Palmyra⁴⁰ among many others.

The great majority of Hezbollah fighters are not deployed to Syria indefinitely. Although some, including commanders, stay there most of the time, the rest rotate in and out of the battle.⁴¹ Yet the rotations have grown longer as the fighting has escalated. Whereas at the outset of Hezbollah involvement, fighters would stay in Syria for stints of a week, during the al-Qusayr battle rotation lengths increased to twenty days, and by the end of 2013 combatants were serving a whole month before returning to Lebanon.⁴² Today, rotation lengths depend on the front line to which fighters are sent—the farther from Lebanon, usually, the longer the rotation. For some part-time fighters, combat in Syria helps fulfill their *murabata*, which is the obligation of every Hezbollah member to serve fifteen days annually on a dangerous front line.⁴³ In the past, *murabata* deployments were mainly to southern Lebanon, but this has changed for some Hezbollah fighters since the beginning of the Syrian war.⁴⁴

A main rationale for the rotations is to avoid over-exhausting combatants. In any war, fighters tire physically and mentally, and rotations help maintain battle

intensity. Additional reasons include maintaining readiness on the Lebanon-Israel front with able and plentiful personnel and ensuring a high number of members gain the invaluable experience of combat in Syria.

Who Is in Charge of Hezbollah in Syria?

Hezbollah is one of the most secretive organizations in the world, and as such, not many details are known about its hierarchy, the identity of its military commanders, or its decisionmaking processes. The same can be said about Hezbollah's operations in Syria. Nevertheless, some details have come out.

Before his death in May 2016, Mustafa Badreddine was Hezbollah's number-one commander in Syria. The brother-in-law and cousin of Imad Mughniyah, Badreddine was also a major suspect in the assassination of former Lebanese prime minister Rafiq al-Hariri.⁴⁵ After Mughniyah was killed in 2008, Badreddine is believed to have taken over most of his duties.⁴⁶ However, even though Badreddine was Hezbollah's most senior official in Syria, Hassan Nasrallah was and remains deeply involved in Syrian-war-related decisionmaking, and he has stayed apprised of all major developments and battle dynamics.⁴⁷ According to the U.S. Department of the Treasury, in 2011 Badreddine accompanied Nasrallah to his weekly meetings with Assad as part of their strategic coordination.⁴⁸ After Badreddine's death, Hezbollah reportedly appointed a new commander to supervise its forces in Syria, a figure who remains anonymous but is known not to have been one of Hezbollah's founding members, as was Badreddine.⁴⁹

Two other notable figures connected to Hezbollah's decisionmaking in Syria, according to the U.S. Treasury Department, are Ibrahim Aqil and Fuad Shukr, both of whom serve on the Jihad Council, Hezbollah's highest military body.⁵⁰ In the Treasury Department's words, both Aqil and Shukr have "played a vital role in Hizballah's military campaign in Syria by aiding Hizballah fighters and pro-Syrian regime troops against Syrian opposition forces in battles inside Syria." Shukr is reportedly one of Hezbollah's highest military

commanders, having assumed some of Mughniyah's responsibilities after his death.⁵¹ Aqil also has a long history in Hezbollah. As a close aide to Mughniyah, according to the journalist Nicholas Blanford, Aqil was almost killed by Israel in a botched assassination attempt in 2000.⁵² At one point, Aqil also apparently headed Hezbollah's military training, and he was considered part of the military triumvirate with Mughniyah and Badreddine.⁵³

Considering Hezbollah's amply demonstrated commitment to Syria, one can be assured that the group will look different when it exits Syria from when it entered. Such changes will arise from the number of fighters involved, the high engagement of Hezbollah's leadership, the participation of all Hezbollah's units, and the group's overall lengthy stay. So no one doubts Hezbollah will be changed: the big question is how.

The Military Effect

More than three years of direct military involvement is highly significant for a national military, and the same can be said for any insurgency, militant organization, or guerrilla force. For some participants, such an experience represents a first instance of combat, along with a first use of various types of weapons or cooperation with other fighting forces. Notwithstanding these many firsts, all such experiences ultimately result in great amounts of reflection and adaptation after the fighting is over. Thus, one can safely assume that the war in Syria will change many of Hezbollah's own paradigms. Such "lessons learned" are not limited to military tactics, the use of weapons, or future military buildup but extend as well to fighting strategy, as outlined here:

HEZBOLLAH'S MILITARY STRATEGY. Hezbollah's military strategy has developed over the years in accordance with its strategic objectives and military capabilities. "Resistance," or *muqawama*, still constitutes part of this strategy, with the destruction of Israel its lodestar.⁵⁴ Yet Israel's destruction, according to this doctrine, need not be achieved in one confrontation but rather through persistent warfare that gradually weakens the Jewish state and garners support from

other regional actors. Other Hezbollah objectives have included forcing Israel to withdraw from the disputed Shebaa Farms area, which straddles the Israeli border with Lebanon and Syria, and bringing back Hezbollah members or other Lebanese serving time in Israeli prisons. As Hezbollah's military capabilities and understanding of how to challenge the Israeli military have improved, the group has, over the years, substantially changed the ways in which it translated its objectives into military strategy and tactics.

A major early lesson Hezbollah learned came not from fighting the IDF but rather from its cooperation with Syria. In 1991, during Operation Desert Storm, the U.S. military effort to evict Saddam Hussein's forces from Kuwait, Syrian generals witnessed firsthand the efficacy of the U.S. AirLand Battle concept and of precision-guided munitions (PGMs). Surmising that Israel had these same capabilities, which would give it a huge military advantage over Syria in any future war, Syrian generals shared their findings with their Hezbollah allies. One conclusion derived from such interactions was that surviving IDF assaults would require Hezbollah to strengthen its defenses against the lethal PGMs.⁵⁵ Moreover, it would need to improve its rocket capabilities to bolster its own deterrence. Because actually defeating the IDF would be unlikely, such a rocket force would be used to cause attrition on Israel's home front. As a result, Hezbollah developed a strategy many in the IDF called "not losing." As the author and Israeli Brig. Gen. Muni Katz wrote in December 2015, "This strategy focused on prolonging the fighting as much as possible, maintaining home-front attrition by firing rockets on Israeli population centers, and increasing the costs of IDF ground maneuvers in southern Lebanon."⁵⁶

Yet developing this strategy took time, and during the 1990s, when the IDF was still present in southern Lebanon, Hezbollah needed to allocate much of its resources to the daily fight, thereby deferring preparation for a larger conflict. Despite being a smaller organization with lower military capability than it has today, Hezbollah still in those years could hurt the IDF, mostly using IEDs, mortars, and small-unit ambushes.

With Israel's withdrawal from Lebanon in May 2000, Hezbollah was empowered to implement its strategy and prepare for a larger conflict with Israel.⁵⁷ The expansion of Hezbollah's military infrastructure during that period centered on its rocket and missile forces, antitank capabilities, defenses, and other areas. Such progress occurred without much inference, in large part because the Israeli military was mainly preoccupied with the second Palestinian intifada, which began in fall 2000.⁵⁸ Several years later, during the 2006 war with Israel, Hezbollah's strategy of "not losing" was on display for all to see. Through the nearly five weeks of fighting, Hezbollah was able to fire between one and two hundred rockets a day, despite extensive counterefforts by the Israeli Air Force and Israeli ground forces. Hezbollah also presented a somewhat effective command-and-control structure that included thousands of fighters divided into small units operating from different southern Lebanese villages.

After the war, Hezbollah drew new lessons about its performance and IDF operations, leading the group to increase recruitment, expand its missile arsenal, acquire more offensive and defensive capabilities, boost its intelligence collection, and upgrade its training.⁵⁹ Beyond the military buildup, some argued that Hezbollah might have changed some of its war strategies altogether.

In April 2014, in the prominent Israeli military journal *Maarachot*, Lt. Col. N (who used only the initial because of his IDF role) argued that a pillar of Hezbollah's "not losing" strategy—prolonging the fight—might no longer be relevant.⁶⁰ He contended that the group probably understands that Israeli forces have the mental and physical stamina to sustain a long round of fighting, whereas Hezbollah itself has limits. Central among these limits are greater accountability to the Lebanese population, and thus an interest in limiting physical damage to Lebanon, and the commitment to the Syrian theater, which divides its resources.⁶¹ According to this logic, Hezbollah will want to shorten the next war against Israel, a goal requiring a swift, impressive achievement of an offensive nature, such as conquering a village in Israel's north or hitting important

infrastructure with accurate missiles.⁶² Such a success would presumably overwhelm Israeli decisionmakers and the Israeli public to an extent that they would want to finish the war quickly. For example, According to this theory, in Hezbollah's mind a mass evacuation of Israel's border villages caused by Hezbollah rockets and ground attacks would pressure the Israeli government to finish the war quickly in order to let families return to their homes. The broader question surrounding such speculation is whether Hezbollah's battle experience in Syria will push it in this offensive direction or cause it to stay with its strategy of "not losing."

Important to note here is that Syria represents Hezbollah's first offensive battlefield experience. Even in the 2006 war with Israel, as already mentioned, Hezbollah assumed a defensive strategy stemming from the "resistance" doctrine. This meant the objective was not to defeat the enemy but instead to keep fighting as long as it could while wearing down Israel's home front. In Syria, by contrast, Hezbollah's military objectives include taking over territory, holding it, and in the end defeating the enemy—namely, the Syrian rebels, Jabhat al-Nusra, and the Islamic State. Also distinct in Syria is Hezbollah's deployment, for the first time, of hundreds of fighters at a time to key battles. Within such groups are artillery units, tactical units, intelligence assets, and others, whereas in the past Hezbollah delegated tasks to small teams, each with its own specialty and its own small territory to defend or use to disrupt IDF movements. This type of offensive experience could change the basic paradigms of many Hezbollah fighters. Naturally, some Hezbollah commanders who achieved important objectives using offensive operations in Syria might ponder that the same approach could work against Israel. Moreover, reports on Hezbollah's desire to infiltrate Israel's north had surfaced back in 2011, long before Hezbollah's commanders participated in many offensive operations in Syria.⁶³ If Hezbollah's commanders entered Syria already mulling such an offensive model, success in such battles would likely only strengthen their convictions.

Another factor that could affect Hezbollah's

calculations on strategy is the Russian involvement in Syria. Starting in September 2015, reports indicated that Hezbollah was part of an operations center in Damascus that included Russian and Iranian elements.⁶⁴ Since then, Hezbollah has taken part in operations that incorporated Russian soldiers and elements of the Russian air force.⁶⁵ In the battle for Salma, for example, Hezbollah advanced with support from Russian artillery and the Russian air force.⁶⁶ In the battle for Palmyra this past March, Hezbollah reportedly deployed some fighters from the Radwan Unit,⁶⁷ while Russia also deployed ground forces, including Special Forces (Spetsnaz); heavy artillery and airstrikes helped them push IS from the city.⁶⁸ These types of operations require close cooperation and coordination among the various forces involved, starting in the planning phase and continuing into their execution. As General Katz and the author wrote last December, "On the macro level, Hezbollah will be exposed to Russian military thought, which entails sophisticated operational concepts and advanced military planning skills."⁶⁹ For a Hezbollah commander accustomed to regarding defense of a village or geographical sector as his battle objective, to suddenly witness the Russians connecting military operations to offensive objectives could be transformative from a strategic and tactical perspective.

For Hezbollah commanders, exposure to Russian planning and execution could have two additional effects. The first would be the reality check inherent in being reminded of the group's own disadvantage against an advanced conventional military, namely Israel's. A good specific example here is Russia's intelligence and electronic warfare (EW) capabilities. The Russians deployed to Syria their most advanced intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) aircraft, the TU-214R, which can produce a fairly clear picture of enemy forces on the ground using electronic intelligence (ELINT) and signals intelligence (SIGINT) capabilities.⁷⁰ The Russians also deployed the Zoopark-1 radar, which can determine the coordinates of enemy artillery positions; the Leer-3, an EW system that can locate Global System for Mobile Communications

(GSM) networks;⁷¹ and some of their new unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs). For Hezbollah, seeing how Russian intelligence and EW capabilities contribute to the battle, and knowing that Israel possesses some of these advanced capabilities, might further illustrate Hezbollah's disadvantage. Yet the second effect, related to the first, is that Hezbollah will see the limitations of these intelligence and EW capabilities. Russia, with all its advanced capabilities, is experiencing difficulty on some Syrian battlefronts. In particular, it has fallen short in detecting and targeting all rebel command posts and logistical storage centers, and apparently has failed to detect imminent attacks by Jaish al-Fatah, a coalition of rebel groups with Jabhat al-Nusra. Hezbollah, by fighting on the ground, can thus observe that even state-of-the-art intelligence capabilities cannot always ensure easy defeat of the enemy. Moreover, Hezbollah might be able to identify blind spots in these capabilities and apply their findings to future fights against Israel.

One possibility here is that the reminder of Israel's technological advantages could convince Hezbollah commanders to stick to, and reinforce, their former defensive strategy. Similarly, after the 2006 war with Israel, Hezbollah invested great resources in preparing for the next war with Israel, focused on improvements to its defensive strategy. But the question of Hezbollah's future strategy, defensive or offensive, is hard to predict. It is safer to assume simply that Hezbollah will need time to implement any strategic changes across the organization based on the group's Syria experience. Yet whatever direction Hezbollah follows, the group's military capabilities will have developed significantly due to its Syria experience, and the IDF and other regional powers should take note.

INCREASED EFFECTIVENESS OF ITS UAV FLEET. Hezbollah's use of drones dates to 2004, when the group launched the Mirsad-1 into Israeli airspace.⁷² During the war in 2006, Hezbollah reportedly launched Iranian Ababil drones carrying explosives aimed at strategic sites in Israel.⁷³ Since then, Hezbollah has launched reconnaissance drones into Israel on a few occasions, including in October 2012 and April 2013.⁷⁴ Of its

several assessments of Hezbollah's drone fleet, IDF intelligence reported back in 2012 that the group had dozens.⁷⁵ Later on, Israeli media indicated that Hezbollah had around two hundred drones, some for reconnaissance purposes and some for attacks.⁷⁶ Although Hezbollah trained with these drones over the years, it had never used them intensively in battle until Syria.

In Syria, Hezbollah has likewise used drones for both intelligence purposes and attacks. In September 2014, for example, Hezbollah apparently used armed drones to bomb a Jabhat al-Nusra command post along the Syria-Lebanon border.⁷⁷ Other actors in Syria have deployed drones as well, such as Iran, the Syrian regime, and Russia. For its part, Iran reportedly deployed in Syria its relatively advanced Shahed 129 drone to hit rebel targets.⁷⁸ In addition, Iran has used "suicide drones," referred to by the analyst Michael Rubin as "a poor man's cruise missile."⁷⁹ These UAVs carry explosives and, when they identify their target, crash into it, echoing similar actions by Hezbollah against Israel.

Hezbollah's close coordination with these actors guarantees that it will learn from their drone missions, alongside drawing lessons from its own, thereby improving its drone capabilities significantly. Among the benefits of these long hours with drones, the first is that operators will become much more familiar with the technological system, including its limits and different components, such as for communication, optics, and weapons systems. In the words of one IDF officer, "The better you know the system, the better you can have new ideas for new missions."⁸⁰ The second aspect is command and control. Through operating drones in different battles, Hezbollah commanders have likely become more adept at coordinating drones' operations with ground forces, starting with understanding optimal timing for a launch and synchronizing intelligence gathered by artillery. Finally, by watching the Iranians and Russians use drones to improve their battlefield intelligence through better analysis and incorporating imagery intelligence with other sources (SIGINT/ELINT/OSINT),⁸¹ Hezbollah will be more prepared to engage in these practices itself.

Such experience is invaluable, especially given the group's investment in its drone fleet for the next war with Israel.⁸²

SHORT-RANGE ROCKET THREAT. Hezbollah is known to have one of the largest rocket and missile arsenals in the Middle East, numbering well over a hundred thousand. This massive stockpile was accumulated after the 2006 Lebanon war, with an emphasis on both numbers and accuracy, qualities that will help the group address Israel's missile defenses and target the country's strategic sites.⁸³ Yet another aspect of this arsenal, beyond numbers and accuracy, has recently gained prominence, mostly due to Hezbollah's Syria experience—the lethality of its short-range rockets. The Syrian experience showed Hezbollah how in an urban environment a rocket with a heavy payload, even if not highly accurate, could inflict massive damage and overwhelm an enemy's defenses. Moreover, the sheer destruction these rockets cause, some with a payload of 500–1,000 kg,⁸⁴ is used to terrorize defenseless civilians. Some argue that these rockets, or improvised rocket-assisted munitions (IRAMs), are based on other designs for smaller payloads used by Shiite militias against U.S. forces in Iraq almost a decade ago and on Iranian Falaq rockets' launchers.⁸⁵ One blog monitoring developments in Syria has documented different versions of this rocket used by Hezbollah in Syria, all called Volcano or Burqan.⁸⁶ Rebel commanders have reported that these rockets are capable of destroying buildings or entire street barricades.⁸⁷

Although Hezbollah has seen intimately how useful these rockets can be while in Syria, Hamas has shown the Lebanese group how they could also be effective against Israel.⁸⁸ The recent Israel-Hamas conflicts, which introduced the capabilities of Israel's Iron Dome system, allowed Hezbollah to see the missile-defense system in action. Indeed, one reason for Hezbollah's rocket and missile buildup is to find ways to "saturate" Iron Dome with multiple strikes. Hamas, in its fights against Israel, has also taught Hezbollah about the efficacy of mortars and short-range rockets. As two Israel-based researchers wrote in October 2014,

Concentrated barrages of rockets on border towns may lead to mass evacuations, which in turn can be marketed effectively as a military achievement—much like Hamas has been doing in the aftermath of Operation Protective Edge—while also serving as a tool of psychological warfare and wielding leverage on the Israeli government.⁸⁹

Israel's missile-defense systems still have no answer for such types of weapons, given their short trajectory and flight time and the corresponding difficulty of intercepting them. Hezbollah will be able to use these rockets to inflict significant damage on border towns in Israel's north and military bases on the Israel-Lebanon border, and to target IDF ground advances into Lebanon. All these scenarios raise concerns within the IDF.⁹⁰ Finally, it bears noting that even though these rockets are highly inaccurate, when they do hit, their heavy payload can cause serious damage.

COMPLEX OFFENSIVE OPERATIONS. Over the years, as this paper has discussed, Hezbollah trained its fighters to defend their southern Lebanese villages against the IDF. As such, they maneuvered and fought as a guerrilla force. During the 2006 war, Hezbollah deployed small units to these villages. Some such units were self-sufficient and possessed various weapons systems, such as antitank guided missiles (ATGMs) and explosives. The main mission of these tactical units was "to slow and to bleed the IDF as much as possible," and if they lost a battle, they simply migrated to the next one or laid down their weapons.⁹¹

As previous passages have shown, Hezbollah missions evolved during the Syrian war, from defense to the seizure and holding of territory. Whereas earlier units were small, groups of hundreds of fighters were now deployed, and success required coordinating with aerial and artillery assets. The battles for Salma, Zabadani, al-Qusayr, and others all involved Hezbollah's ground units operating in an urban environment while its own artillery units operated alongside those of Syria and Russia, indicating a high level of coordination. Moreover, some of these battles incorporated aerial assets capable of feeding live intelligence to the ground units, thereby improving their operations. These

offensive operations, starkly different from Hezbollah's former activities in southern Lebanon, likely taught the group many skills: how to form a better command-and-control architecture, how to fuse intelligence sources to generate more targets in battle, which weapons to use in different scenarios, and how to maintain logistical support in battle. Here, one can imagine a scenario in the next war with Israel during which the IDF seizes a southern Lebanese village: whereas during the 2006 war Hezbollah small units would have either withdrawn or stayed to disrupt IDF advances, Hezbollah might in this future war mount an offensive operation with dozens of fighters aimed at retaking the village. Another possibility is that Hezbollah would use its ground forces and special forces to execute a multidimensional offensive attack (sea, ground, tunnels), coordinating with its artillery and aerial assets to take over an Israeli village close to the Lebanon-Israel border. If such a scenario was far-fetched scenario back in 2006, today it is not entirely unlikely.

HEZBOLLAH'S MILITARY READINESS. The discussion now comes to how much Hezbollah's involvement in Syria affects its war readiness vis-à-vis Israel. To be sure, the group would not want to be divided between such fights.⁹² But if tensions rise considerably with Israel, Hezbollah's effectiveness in such a scenario would rely on two variables: having enough fighters and having them be adequately trained. Other variables would also play into Hezbollah's potential success, but these two are considered crucial.

As compared to today's Hezbollah standing force of 21,000 (out of around 45,000 total fighters), estimates during the 2006 Lebanon war placed the group's standing force at around 6,000–8,000.⁹³ Indeed, the group's surge in popularity following the 2006 war was the main factor propelling enlistment of young Shiites.⁹⁴ Moreover, Hezbollah reestablished the *Saraya al-Muqawama*, its fighting force for non-Shiite Lebanese that was formed in 1997 but disbanded after the 2000 Israeli withdrawal.⁹⁵

Despite the difficulty of assessing how many fighters Hezbollah has in Lebanon at any given time, one can

come to a rough estimate of some 30,000–33,000, in part by accounting for Hezbollah's presence in Syria (roughly 5,000–8,000), its fatalities (more than 1,600), and its injured (more than 5,000).⁹⁶ This assessment, however, is necessarily incomplete given the impossibility of knowing how many of the killed or injured were standing or reserve forces. In other words, one does not see how many were highly capable and how many were less capable fighters. According to one former high-ranking IDF officer, most of the casualties and injured come from Hezbollah's standing forces, including many experienced commanders.⁹⁷ Thus, even assuming that *all* the casualties as well as current Hezbollah fighters in Syria are standing forces, Hezbollah would still have in Lebanon more than 6,000 standing forces, or very capable fighters, supported by more than 20,000 less-skilled reserves. Such rough figures compare slightly favorably to Hezbollah's situation in 2006. True, the loss of many commanders and capable fighters affects the quality of a military organization, but one also must remember that many Hezbollah fighters received the necessary experience in Syria to make them future commanders. As Yaakov Amidror, the former Israeli national security advisor, wrote in November 2015, "The intensive fighting in Syria has gained Hezbollah valuable experience, effectively training a new generation of commanders who have cut their operational teeth on the battlefield."⁹⁸

Regarding Hezbollah's training routine, involvement in Syria does not appear to have done significant damage. Some IDF analysts even say the Syrian experience improved it.⁹⁹

Every Hezbollah fighter goes through a series of training sessions in Lebanon in which he learns basic fighting skills, and some continue their training to become experts in fields such as explosives, ATGMs, or sniping.¹⁰⁰ An important aspect of this routine has historically been travel to Iran, and sometimes Syria, for multiple weeks for advanced training on various weapons systems.¹⁰¹ After the 2006 war, when Hezbollah added thousands of recruits to its ranks, the organization sent hundreds of fighters to Iran to train on ATGMs, the firing of rockets and missiles at all ranges,

intelligence, and explosives.¹⁰² Today, because of Hezbollah's presence in Syria, sending hundreds of fighters to Iran for weeks is no longer possible.¹⁰³ Instead, the group has used Syria as a training ground to conduct its elaborate "live-fire exercises." Such training can occur outside Syrian battlefronts. Moreover, every time Hezbollah wants to test new weapons or tactics, it does so in Syria. As one IDF officer reported, "Syria today is Hezbollah's experiments lab."¹⁰⁴ Thus, the group maintains its overall training routine through activity in both Lebanon and Syria, with training in Syria probably logistically simpler than sending fighters to Iran—along with allowing more personnel to be trained in live combat.

One area of Hezbollah training that may have suffered during the Syria conflict involves transitioning from routine to high-alert situations in Lebanon. After the 2006 war, Hezbollah reportedly conducted two massive military drills in southern Lebanon, deploying thousands of fighters to their positions,¹⁰⁵ with one objective being to shorten the transition time from routine to war readiness.¹⁰⁶ Since its involvement in Syria began, Hezbollah has not conducted a drill resembling the scope of those post-2006 drills. As a result, the group may have a weakened ability to quickly mobilize its fighters to the front line. If tensions with Israel rise while Hezbollah has fighters in Syria pulled from its southern-Lebanon-based units, the organization might find it hard to transition to high alert quickly.

In thus looking at this scenario, one can conclude that Hezbollah has a significant number of well-trained fighters in Lebanon at any given time, fighters that will be able to sustain fighting against Israel from the beginning of a war until Hezbollah reinforcements arrive from Syria. The group would obviously prefer to avoid such a scenario, yet it is still capable of operating within such limits. The duration of the Syrian war presents an unknown, but to maintain its current level of readiness, Hezbollah will need to keep bringing in new recruits and training them at today's levels. Both goals will be very hard, though not impossible, to accomplish.

Two areas deserve attention relating to the number

of available Hezbollah fighters and their adequate training. One involves potential reinforcement from various Shiite militias. Indeed, in the Syrian conflict, a major development has been the merging of fighting arenas for Hezbollah and its partners. Even before the Syrian war, Hezbollah, Iranian elements, and Shiite militias from Iraq and Syria had fought side by side on multiple battlefronts. The Syrian war only strengthened such relations, bolstered by great battlefield victories. True, some of these Shiite fighters are working for money and others for ideology, but that does not mean they will not come together similarly in Lebanon. Even if not to fight directly against the IDF, these militias will be able to conduct simple missions such as guarding sensitive sites in Lebanon or Syria, thereby freeing Hezbollah fighters to mobilize to the front lines.

The second issue is that Hezbollah's strategic arsenal, namely its tens of thousands of rockets and missiles and other advanced weapons, remains intact. Hezbollah does not use its mid-to-long-range rockets and missiles in Syria, nor does it use its surface-to-air or surface-to-sea missiles, meaning that its strategic arsenals are still viable and war ready. Regarding its other infantry weapons and equipment, including assault rifles, ATGMs, explosives, communications elements, and more, Hezbollah currently does not suffer from any significant shortages.¹⁰⁷

In summary, Hezbollah's preparations for war with Israel have no doubt been hampered by its involvement in Syria, but the organization has nonetheless maintained significant capabilities to fight Israel, at least for now.

Does the Battle for Syria Weaken Hezbollah's Support in Lebanon?

Since its establishment, Hezbollah's political and military success in Lebanon was always based on the group's loyal supporters, the country's Shiite community. Hezbollah brought this community, constituting around 1.6 million citizens,¹⁰⁸ to prominence after years of neglect by the Lebanese political echelon. Over the years, Hezbollah invested massive resources in improving overall infrastructure, housing,

education, health services, and more in Shiite areas.¹⁰⁹ This economic investment, along with the cultivation of its “resistance ideology,” which historically meant the fight against Israel and the image of the “defender of Lebanon,” cemented relations between Hezbollah and the Shiite community. In return, Hezbollah attracted tens of thousands of recruits to its ranks and political support for its agenda.

Over the years, some grievances expressed by Hezbollah’s constituents strained the social pact between the two,¹¹⁰ but in general, support for the organization among the Shiite community in the last fifteen years has remained high. In fact, in many of the surveys conducted in Lebanon, the organization usually gets above 80 percent favorable ratings among Shiites.¹¹¹ Yet Hezbollah’s involvement in the Syrian war presented a great challenge to this support. As Randa Slim, a senior researcher at the Middle East Institute, wrote in 2013, “Hezbollah’s decision to plunge into the Syrian abyss is a potential turning point in Hezbollah’s trajectory since its founding in the early 1980s and might prove to be the undoing of the monopoly Hezbollah has so far enjoyed over Lebanon’s Shiites.”¹¹²

One impact of this involvement can be felt in the more than 1,600 perished and more than 5,000 injured Hezbollah fighters. These losses have significant effects on Hezbollah’s military readiness, but they also have a significant effect on the Shiite community in Lebanon. Considering that 60 percent of Hezbollah’s casualties came from southern Lebanon¹¹³ and its many villages,¹¹⁴ one perceives how this Hezbollah stronghold is carrying a significant burden of the group’s war effort. As a former high-ranking IDF officer remarked, “According to the number of casualties and their origin in Lebanon, it is safe to assume that every Shiite family in southern Lebanon knows someone who died or was injured in the Syrian civil war. Beyond the deep psychological effect on the community, there is also the financial cost for families losing their main providers.” This economic impact, along with reports about Hezbollah cutting some social services because of its Syria involvement,¹¹⁵ has naturally raised concerns among members of the Shiite community.

Another source of Syria-related criticism from Hezbollah supporters has centered on the group’s inability to bring back the bodies of all loved ones for burial in Lebanon.¹¹⁶ Respect and honor for martyrs constitutes an important Shiite tradition, and Hezbollah’s shortfall on this count has thus been noted.¹¹⁷

Even as Lebanese Shiites have endured substantial losses because of Hezbollah involvement in the Syrian war, the group’s status among its Lebanese base does not appear to have been fundamentally jeopardized. This is mainly because Hezbollah’s leadership used various social and financial tools to maintain cohesion among its supporters.

First, Hezbollah’s public massaging to its domestic constituency has proven very effective. Starting in 2013, when the group’s involvement in Syria became public, Hezbollah’s leadership, mainly Hassan Nasrallah, framed the endeavor as protecting Lebanon, the Shiites of Lebanon, and Shiite holy sites in Syria.¹¹⁸ The narrative presented by Hezbollah indicated that this was not a war of choice but rather a war of necessity to defend Lebanon from *takfiri*-jihadist terrorist organizations such as the Islamic State and Jabhat al-Nusra.¹¹⁹ A survey conducted by a Lebanese NGO in 2015 showed that the Lebanese Shiite community believed this narrative (57.2% of respondents stated that the *takfiri* threat is the most important issue facing the community, and 79.9% thought that Hezbollah’s actions in Syria made them more secure).¹²⁰ Moreover, in order to maintain the “resistance” factor of its ideology with regard to Syria, Hezbollah frequently emphasized that these terrorist groups were established and funded by the United States and Israel. Nasrallah, who still enjoys much support from the Shiite community,¹²¹ made sure to reinforce this narrative, mainly through televised speeches and interviews given to media outlets. In fact, since Hezbollah’s involvement in Syria started, Nasrallah has appeared every few weeks in interviews, televised speeches, and even in public, driving home the narrative that Hezbollah, through its Syria effort, is combating a threat to Lebanon as well as fighting the United States and Israel.

The second tool used to maintain Shiite support

for the organization is sending Hezbollah public figures to the funerals of fighters killed in Syria—a means of showing Hezbollah’s respect for its martyrs and emphasizing their importance to the organization. Even before Hezbollah got involved in Syria, one must note, Hezbollah officials attended every funeral of a fighter killed in training or other circumstances. At funerals for the Syria combatants, Hezbollah has highlighted its presence by sending high-ranking officials, who have given speeches emphasizing the importance of the war.¹²² Such top-level attendees have included Hezbollah’s members of Lebanese parliament, the heads of Hezbollah’s executive council, political council, and sharia board, along with notable religious leaders, military commanders, and some of Nasrallah’s senior advisors.¹²³

The third tool has been money and other supports. In the last few years, many reports have indicated that Hezbollah’s involvement in Syria, along with falling oil prices and the nuclear sanctions on Iran—Hezbollah’s main funder—has dealt the organization heavy financial losses.¹²⁴ These constraints reportedly led to salary cuts, reduced support for Hezbollah’s political allies, and postponed payments to some suppliers.¹²⁵ Moreover, in recent months the U.S. Treasury Department expanded its activities against Hezbollah’s drug trafficking, money laundering, and arms procurement practices, further straining the group’s finances.¹²⁶ Yet even with all these difficulties, and the resulting cutbacks, Hezbollah remains able to support its base, comprising the organization’s fighters and their families.¹²⁷ The group has sustained the provision of social services to this base and helped families who have lost their providers in Syria.¹²⁸ The organization’s fighters are still being paid well, and they know they can rely on Hezbollah to support their families.¹²⁹ Moreover, given Lebanon’s persistently dire economic situation, not many alternatives exist for Hezbollah members even if they did want to leave the organization and find work elsewhere.

Alongside their receptivity to these gestures, Lebanese Shiites have remained steadily supportive of Hezbollah because they do not see a strong political

and social alternative to the group. Indeed, in the last decade, some prominent Shiite figures have tried to display a different vision for the community. Some such voices emerged after the 2006 war, following the argument that Hezbollah’s actions caused massive destruction to Lebanon.¹³⁰ Related organizations, such as the Lebanese Civil Coalition, Hayya Bina, Janoubia, and others, have seen limited support.¹³¹ However, they still cannot provide the Shiite community what Hezbollah provides, including a strong political voice in the government and financial support. Cracks have appeared in Shiite backing for Hezbollah, but there has been no turning point.

Ultimately, one must also remember that Lebanon today is experiencing a sharp rise in sectarianism, mainly between its Sunni and Shiite communities.¹³² These frictions have always existed, but they have intensified in recent years due to the Syrian war and other regional developments. In this unstable and unpredictable political and security environment, people tend to fall back on their communities for protection, so it is not surprising that many Shiites express their support to Hezbollah even if they do not agree completely with all the group’s objectives.

The bottom line is that the main constituency of Hezbollah, the Shiite community in Lebanon, still supports it. This support has declined slightly, but the overall majority of the community sees Hezbollah as its true political representative, its defender against external and internal threats, and its provider of livelihood and basic services. The scenario of further decline in support for the organization is possible, but for now, it does not seem probable.

Hezbollah’s Regional Problems

While Hezbollah has generally held its support in Lebanon among the Shiite community, the same cannot be said for its regional support. Before its involvement in Syria, Hezbollah was one of the most admired organizations in the region and its leader, Hassan Nasrallah, was the most popular Arab leader.¹³³ Public opinion polls showed high support for the organization in such countries as Kuwait, Jordan, and

Egypt, and this support had only increased after the 2006 war against Israel.¹³⁴ However, when Hezbollah entered the Syrian theater, aligning itself with the Assad regime, this support started to decline rapidly. Hezbollah's image as the standard-bearer of the fight against Israel and the advocate of minorities in Lebanon and the Palestinians changed drastically to that of a main contributor to the Sunni-Shiite rift.

In polls conducted in 2014 and 2015, Hezbollah had only 13–15 percent approval in the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia, and in Kuwait, where roughly a third of the population is Shiite, the group earned only 24 percent approval.¹³⁵ In Jordan, a country in which Hezbollah was perceived as mostly a positive actor in 2010, with 55 percent favorable ratings,¹³⁶ its support plummeted in 2013 to only 25 percent.¹³⁷ One could argue that regional backing might not be all that important to Hezbollah in comparison to support from the Lebanese people, but declining regional support also corresponds to greater sympathy for government actions (in this case, regional actions) against the organization. Last March, for example, the Arab League labeled Hezbollah a terrorist organization, days after the Gulf Cooperation Council did the same.¹³⁸ Ten years ago, such an action would have been criticized vehemently by the larger Arab public, but today it is largely accepted. As Arab governments continue to consider other measures against Hezbollah, Arab public support is expected to follow. Saudi Arabia already suspended a major military aid package to Lebanon and revoked another pledge to support Lebanon's Internal Security Forces, with the total amount suspended equaling \$4 billion.¹³⁹

What Lies Ahead for Hezbollah in Syria?

Given that international negotiations have failed to establish a path forward for ending the Syrian war, questions arise as to Hezbollah's role in this continuing war and what long-term plans the group may have in Syria?

To be sure, Hezbollah would prefer the quickest possible end to the war, allowing the group to reallocate resources to Lebanon and allowing its fighters

to rest. But the reality promises no such respite. Thus, in May 2015, Nasrallah emphasized the organization's commitment to the Syrian regime, saying, "We are fighting alongside our Syrian brothers, alongside the army and the people and the popular resistance in Damascus and Aleppo and Deir Ezzor and Qusayr and Hasakeh and Idlib...we are present today in many places and we will be present in all the places in Syria that this battle requires."¹⁴⁰ A year later, in May 2016, Nasrallah repeated this message: "We will increase and bolster our presence in Syria...more commanders than before will go to Syria. We will be present in different ways and we will continue the fight."¹⁴¹ Nasrallah's statements should not be taken as absolute truths, but they do often indicate the general direction of the organization. Accordingly, Hezbollah will likely keep fighting in Syria as long as the Assad regime and Iran need its help. Both Iran and Hezbollah are committed to the survival of the regime,¹⁴² and as the balance of power keeps tilting in their favor, it is hard to imagine they will drop their support any time soon.

As mentioned, for Hezbollah, and especially for Nasrallah, Assad is also the guarantor of the logistical lifeline, as Damascus is the transit hub for weapons deliveries from Iran. Additionally, Hezbollah has a significant military infrastructure in Syria that was developed over the years with regime approval, including weapons storage facilities and training and logistical bases.¹⁴³ In the last few years, Hezbollah has built new bases in Syria, indicating its plans to expand its military infrastructure in the country. For example, after its victory in al-Qusayr in June 2013, Hezbollah reportedly built a new base near the city, which is being used as a training facility and a line of defense close to the Syria-Lebanon border.¹⁴⁴ As mentioned, Hezbollah has moved a significant part of its training to Syria, and the organization will correspondingly need new facilities such as the one in al-Qusayr. Given Hezbollah's invaluable military infrastructure in Syria, the group is sure to keep fighting hard before letting any of it go.

The Syrian civil war has also opened new possibilities in the fight against Israel. In recent months,

Hezbollah and Iran have focused mostly on central and northern Syria, but their plans regarding the southern part of the country, especially on the border with Israel, still stand. In January 2015, Israel reportedly killed Jihad Mughniyah, the son of Hezbollah's former military commander Imad Mughniyah, who was in charge of establishing a terrorist infrastructure in the Syrian Golan Heights.¹⁴⁵ This attempt was part of a bigger Iranian project to expand the "axis of resistance" to the Golan as another possible fighting front against Israel.¹⁴⁶ Still unclear is whether Iran will take the lead on this front through other proxies and Hezbollah will only help in training, but expanding operations to the Golan makes sense for the group, giving it strategic depth against Israel through a second front from which to challenge the IDF. Moreover, targeting Israel from the Golan, in the eyes of Hezbollah, minimizes the chances for escalation on the Lebanese front, given that Israel tends to retaliate in the theater from which it was attacked.¹⁴⁷ Currently, the Golan front has taken the backseat to more important battles, but in the long term Hezbollah and Iran will probably continue to operate there.

Conclusion

In examining the military and political effects of Hezbollah's involvement in Syria, one sees that the group has paid a heavy price in blood and treasure but that it has also achieved much. For an entity that has evolved from a small cadre of militants to a large guerrilla force to a semimilitary organization, Hezbollah has seen its role as a major political and military regional actor and a crucial partner in the Iran-led "resistance axis" highlighted by its Syria experience. Hezbollah is not a juggernaut that cannot be defeated, but a formidable force that must be assessed frequently. Thus, as the Syrian war rages on, tracking developments and their effects on Hezbollah and its partners will yield important insights.

For now, Hezbollah remains willing and able to fight in Syria alongside the Assad regime and Iran. For the Lebanon-based group, the war represents not just a military campaign to help Assad but rather an

existential battle to maintain its military and political status. Although many analysts have contended that the group is exhausted and worse off than at any time since its establishment, a claim supported by high casualties and the war's unknown duration, Hezbollah is not yet on its knees. Contrary to multiple reports over the past five years that Hezbollah was retreating from Syria or could not sustain its presence there, today the group remains in Syria with large numbers fighting in multiple arenas. The statements reflecting doubt about Hezbollah's endurance echo those before the 2006 Lebanon war, when some asserted that the group could not survive a war against Israel, statements that were proven wrong. One should not underestimate Hezbollah's resolve and resources in protecting its core interests in Syria.

Regarding the Israeli front, Hezbollah clearly does not want a war, but that does not mean it cannot manage wars on two fronts. Hezbollah's investment in Syria is substantial, but the organization still has significant auxiliaries in Lebanon—namely, thousands of capable fighters and its strategic arsenal of missiles and rockets. One should not assume that because of its commitments to Syria, Hezbollah would be weak on the Lebanese front. Currently, Israel too prefers not to fight, but unintended escalations can always happen, and incidents like the one that occurred in January 2015, when Hezbollah fired seven ATGMs at IDF troops, can easily develop into full-blown wars.¹⁴⁸

It is too early to tell if the "resistance axis" will emerge stronger or weaker from the Syrian war, but in any case, in the eyes of its partners, Hezbollah's position within this axis has been strengthened. The group's military achievements have validated the investments in it by the Syrian regime and, more important, by Iran. On many battlefronts, Hezbollah was a force multiplier, and its willingness to keep sending fighters to Syria while Iran at first hesitated to do so showed both Assad and the IRGC that the group could be counted on in times of need. Moreover, even while it was fighting in Syria, Hezbollah contributed significantly to Iran's other regional endeavors in Yemen and Iraq.¹⁴⁹ These symbiotic relationships will also work to

Hezbollah's benefit in that both the Syrian regime and the IRGC will continue pouring money and weapons into the organization. If the group is under threat, one can expect that Iran and the Syrian regime will stand by Hezbollah's side. True, before the Syrian civil war both the regime and Iran were already committed to Hezbollah, but after years of fighting and bleeding together, this commitment has only grown stronger.

On the regional level, various Shiite and Sunni insurgencies and terrorist groups will gain much better trainers as a result of Hezbollah's Syria experience. Long before the Syrian war started, Hezbollah was training and equipping various actors in the region, including Shiite militias in Iraq and the Houthis

in Yemen. Reports indicate that Hezbollah continues to help these actors,¹⁵⁰ and with its new experience gained in Syria, the level of such training will only improve. Hezbollah is already transferring some of its knowledge to its partners through Hezbollah commanders who incorporate Shiite fighters from Iraqi and Syrian militias. In time, Hezbollah trainers will be able to contour lessons learned in Syria to the objectives of other regional Shiite and Sunni partners— Hamas, for example, in the latter case. Beyond benefiting from the proliferation of various conventional weapons, Hezbollah's partners will learn new fighting techniques, how best to utilize their current weapons, and how to work with other forces in complex battles.

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