

ISSUES IN PERSPECTIVE

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HEZBOLLAH: AN EMERGING REGIONAL POWER?

Hezbollah, a Lebanese militia founded in the 1980s, has been an ongoing nemesis for Israel on its northern border. It has fought brief conflicts with Israel (most recently in 2006) and has amassed an arsenal of rockets all aimed at Israeli cities and settlements. But over the last five years, Hezbollah has expanded its operations and is no longer merely a Lebanese militia; it has become a regional power of import in the Middle East. Perhaps more importantly, it has become one of the key instruments of Iran in building a powerful Shiite corridor from Iran to the Mediterranean. As Ben Hubbard of the *New York Times* recently observed, “Hezbollah is involved in nearly every fight that matters to Iran and, more significantly, has helped recruit, train and arm an array of new militant groups that are also advancing Iran’s agenda.” Hezbollah is now the prototype for the kind of militias Iran is now backing around the region. Iran also relies on Hezbollah to accomplish its goals.

Hubbard summarizes the compatibility of Hezbollah and Iran: “Iran and Hezbollah complement each other. Both are Shiite powers in a part of the world that is predominately Sunni. For Iran, a Persian nation in a mostly Arab region, Hezbollah lends not just military prowess but also Arabic-speaking leaders and operatives who can work more easily in the Arab world. And for Hezbollah, the alliance means money for running an extensive social services network in Lebanon, with schools, hospitals and scout troops—as well as for weapons, technology and salaries for its tens of thousands of fighters.” Hezbollah has also played a critical role in propping up the brutal regime of Bashar al-Assad, an important Iranian ally. Furthermore, Hezbollah (which means “party of God”) has deep ideological ties to Iran. “Most endorse vilayat-e-faqih, the concept that Iran’s supreme leader is both the highest political power in the country and the paramount religious authority. They also trumpet their goal of combating American and Israeli interests, while arguing that they fill gaps left by weak governments and fight Sunni jihadist like al-Qaeda and the Islamic State.” As the Syrian civil war winds down, the question now is what will Hezbollah do next? Will the battle-hardened Hezbollah fighters be deployed for another war with Israel?

How has Iran used the Hezbollah militia in the region? Several key areas:

- Hezbollah fighters have surfaced in Iraq’s battlefields. After America overthrew Saddam Hussein in 2003, Iran summoned Hezbollah operatives to Iraq to help organize militias to fight the Americans with road-side bombs and other insurgency tactics.

- Hezbollah has also been involved in supporting the Houthi rebels in Yemen with military and logistical aid.
- It has helped organize a battalion of militants from Afghanistan that can fight almost anywhere.
- Of course Hezbollah's major intervention has been in Syria, where they joined Iran and Russia in undergirding the Assad regime. They did so to preserve their only Arab state sponsor (i.e., Syria) and to preserve the weapons pipeline from Iran. Hezbollah's leader, Hassan Nasrallah consulted with officials in Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps and thereby made their commitment to back Assad. Since that meeting, Hezbollah has deployed over 8,000 fighters to Syria, and, now that Assad's regime seems to be secure, Hezbollah will no doubt maintain a permanent presence in Syria. "Syria has given a new generation of Hezbollah fighters extensive experience, including in offensive operations and in coordinating with the Syrian military and the Russian air force." Hezbollah is now one of the Middle East's most formidable fighting forces. For Israel the greatest concern of this clout for Hezbollah in the region is that Hezbollah has been able to move missile batteries into Syria, "giving it another potential platform for attacks on Israel besides Lebanon." Hezbollah remains dedicated to the elimination of Israel and is still considered a terrorist organization by the United States. For that reason, Israel has been carrying out air strikes against Hezbollah targets in Syria. It sees the danger of Hezbollah in the future and wants to restrain it now.

With the growth of Hezbollah and the growing influence and success of Iran, a new danger now lurks in the volatile Middle East, especially for Israel as well. In a sense, Iran (and its lackey Hezbollah) potentially poses a real existential threat to the nation state of Israel. Iran has been exploiting the breakdown of Arab states and ties to Shia Islamic communities. A Shia crescent is no longer a dream; it seems more and more a reality. Iran is indeed close to securing an overland route that would run from Tehran, via Baghdad, to the Mediterranean. This would make it easier to supply Hezbollah with arms and fighters from Iraq, Afghanistan and Pakistan. "Such a land bridge is anathema to Israel." Indeed, Israeli intelligence officials claim that Iran will soon be getting air and naval bases, as well as mining rights, in Syria. Iranian firms have won new contracts in the oil, gas and agricultural sectors of Syria. The Syrian civil war has seen Hezbollah evolve from a militia into something resembling a professional army, capable of fighting "brigade-scale battles." Although Hezbollah's losses during the Syrian war have been large (about 2,000 have been killed), its financial resources have also been depleted, making it even more dependent on Iran.

After the Islamic Revolution in 1979 in Iran, which brought Ayatollah Khomeini to power, Iranian leaders sent officers from the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps to organize Shiite militias in the Lebanese civil war. The result of this effort was Hezbollah, which began waging a guerilla type war against Israel. When Israel withdrew from Lebanon in 2000, Hezbollah remained as the centerpiece of the resistance in the north against Israel. Furthermore, when it

fought a 34-day war against Israel in 2006, Hezbollah was regarded as a winner because the war ended basically in a draw. Today, Hezbollah has more than 100,000 rockets and missiles pointed at Israel, in addition to its 30,000 trained fighters. Hezbollah and Iran are clearly emerging as the greatest beneficiaries of the Syrian civil war—and that spells potential trouble for Israel. Hezbollah now joins Iran as a formidable regional power in the Middle East.

See Ben Hubbard in the *New York Times* (28 August 2017); *The Economist* (16 September 2017), pp. 19-20; Yaroslav Trofimov in the *Wall Street Journal* (1 September 2017).