

HEZBOLLAH'S REGIONAL ACTIVITIES IN SUPPORT OF IRAN'S PROXY NETWORKS

THE MIDDLE EAST INSTITUTE

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JULY 2021



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Cover photo: Hezbollah militants hold flags during the funeral procession of five of their colleagues who were killed in clashes with Turkish army in the Syrian province of Idlib, March 1, 2020. [Photo by Marwan Naamani/picture alliance via Getty Images.](#)



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ABSTRACT

As a Lebanese actor ideologically tied to Iran, Hezbollah has multiple allegiances and objectives that do not always align symmetrically. Hezbollah’s regional activities are a reflection of the group’s increasingly close alignment with Iran, rather than the interests of the Lebanese state or citizenry. Today, Hezbollah’s regional adventurism is most pronounced in its expeditionary forces deployed in Syria and elsewhere in the region, but no less important are the group’s advanced training regimen for other Shi’a militias aligned with Iran, its expansive illicit financing activities across the region, and its procurement, intelligence, cyber, and disinformation activities. Together, these underscore the scale and scope of the group’s all-in approach to transforming from one of several Lebanese militias into a regional player acting at Iran’s behest.



Photo above: Supporters of the Shiite Hezbollah movement watch as the movement’s leader Hassan Nasrallah delivers a speech on a screen in the southern Lebanese city of Nabatieh on January 12, 2020. Photo by MAHMOUD ZAYYAT/AFP via Getty Images.



Hezbollah’s roles in the wars in Iraq and Syria significantly changed ... how the group’s alliance with Iran plays out in practice throughout the region.



I. Introduction: Hezbollah’s Shifting Center of Gravity

From its inception, Hezbollah has always been closely allied with Iran. Iran played a key, hands-on role in its formation, and Hezbollah’s commitment to Iran is a primary reason for the inherent and often uncomfortable conflict between its competing goals in Lebanon and across the Middle East. Hezbollah has deep interests in Lebanon, where it engages in political, economic, social, and military activities. But the group is also engaged in a wide array of militant, terrorist, and criminal activities outside Lebanon that are equally fundamental to understanding the group in its totality. This includes Hezbollah training other Iranian proxy groups and even deploying key personnel and military units far beyond Lebanon’s borders. These activities abroad, even more than its militia activity at home and its wars with Israel, have led countries around the world to task their law enforcement and intelligence agencies with countering Hezbollah’s activities.

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But Hezbollah’s roles in the wars in Iraq and Syria significantly changed the nature of how the group’s alliance with Iran plays out in practice throughout the region, including significant deployments of Hezbollah personnel beyond Lebanon’s borders and a well-organized training program to help Iran develop networks of Shi’a militant fighters. Recognizing this growing regional threat, in 2016 the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) branded Hezbollah a terrorist group and Gulf states have cracked down on Hezbollah supporters and financiers within their borders.¹ The Arab League and the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) have issued statements condemning Hezbollah as well,² leading to a war of words between the group and Gulf officials. In 2018, Morocco broke diplomatic ties with Iran over reported Hezbollah ties to the Polisario Front.³

The first signs of Hezbollah’s shift to a regional posture in support of Iranian interests were structural and involved moving key personnel from positions focused on Israel to those involving Iraq, Yemen, and Syria. As Hezbollah trained more Shi’a fighters from around the region, and then led them in battles across Syria, the group emerged as the leader and coalescing force for a broad range of Shi’a militants tied to Iran and the Quds Force (QF), the branch of Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) primarily responsible for foreign operations. Over time, IRGC-QF commander Gen. Qassem Soleimani personally assumed more of a command leadership position over Hezbollah’s fighting forces, at times at the expense of the group’s own commanders.

Then, following the January 2020 assassination of Soleimani alongside Iraqi Shi’a militia leader Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, Hezbollah assumed more of a leadership role coordinating the activities of a broad network of Shi’a militant proxies — the “Resistance Axis”⁴ — on behalf of Iran’s IRGC-QF. Taken together, these events shifted Hezbollah’s center of gravity in the region from being a Lebanese militia primarily focused on activities in Lebanon and opposition to Israel to a regional actor playing a leadership role for Iran’s regional network of militant proxies on behalf of the IRGC-QF.

II. Iran’s Role in the Formation of Hezbollah⁵

Founded in 1982 by a group of young Shi’a militants, Lebanese Hezbollah (the “Party of God”) was the product of an Iranian effort to aggregate under one roof a variety of militant Shi’a groups in Lebanon, themselves the products of the domestic and regional instability of the time. Hezbollah was the outgrowth of the country’s complex and bloody civil war. For the first time, Lebanon’s historically marginalized Shi’a Muslims attempted to assert economic and political power. A 1984 CIA report notes that “Iran began to develop close links with Lebanese Shias soon after the Israeli invasion in June 1982. Some 800 Revolutionary Guards were sent to Lebanon through Syria to help recruit Hezbollahi, provide political and religious indoctrination and military training, including instruction in terrorist tactics.”⁶ In 1987, the CIA assessed that “an Islamic fundamentalist movement probably would have developed in Lebanon without outside support, but Iranian aid has been a major stimulant.”⁷ Shortly after the Israeli invasion, hundreds of IRGC advisors and trainers set up a base in the Bekaa Valley with the goal of exporting the Islamic revolution to the Arab world.⁸ Hezbollah Deputy Secretary-General Naim Qassem recalls how training camps supervised by the IRGC were set up in the Bekaa Valley as early as 1982 and how all members were required to attend these camps and learn how to confront the “enemy.”⁹

In its early years, Hezbollah functioned as a “network of radical Shia paramilitary groups that agree[d] on major strategic goals such as the establishment of an Islamic republic but often differ[ed] on tactical or operational matters.”¹⁰ These militant networks were typically organized around specific family clans, such as the Musawi and Hamadi families.¹¹ In 1985, Hezbollah identified the organization’s ideological platform: “We view the Iranian regime as the vanguard and new nucleus of the leading Islamic State in the world. We abide by the orders of one single wise and just leadership, represented by *‘waliyat el faqih’* [guardianship of the jurist] and personified by [Iranian Supreme

Leader Ayatollah Ruhollah] Khomeini.”¹² Hezbollah has been Iran’s proxy ever since, and it is estimated that Iran provides Hezbollah with as much as \$700 million-1 billion per year.¹³

III. Hezbollah Development as an Iranian Proxy¹⁴

Despite its foundation as a Lebanese political party, Hezbollah has always profited from Iran’s material and ideological support. The close alignment between Iran and Hezbollah was exemplified early on by the latter’s “name game.” Hezbollah adopted the alias of the Islamic Jihad Organization to give it “a modicum of plausible deniability,” muddling its relationship with Iran.¹⁵ As early as 1983, the CIA observed that Islamic Jihad “more likely is a cover used by Iran for its terrorist operations, whether employing local Shias in Lebanon or locally recruited agents of other nationalities” and that “[s]urrogates provide Iran with an excellent means for creating the illusion that an independent, international organization is at work against U.S. interests.”¹⁶

Soon, the U.S. intelligence community would collect information, later declassified, underscoring the close relationship between Hezbollah, its Islamic Jihad terrorist wing, and Iran. For example, instructions from Iran’s Ministry of Intelligence to Lebanese terrorists in 1985 urged them to conduct a propaganda campaign in the name of Islamic Jihad, an event the National Intelligence Council found to be “the first definite link” between the Iranians and Islamic Jihad.¹⁷ Throughout the 1980s, Iran and Hezbollah continued to seek a degree of public separation by means of using the alias Islamic Jihad, but CIA reports definitively established Islamic Jihad was Hezbollah, not some rogue militant group.

Islamic Jihad started off as a loosely organized group, but Iran helped it coalesce into the organized group we now know as Hezbollah. In March 1984, the CIA assessed that “Tehran could change the present character of ‘Islamic Jihad’ from a loose association of largely independent, irregularly organized Shiite factions into a more formalized, international organization.”¹⁸ Indeed, this predicted formalization and professionalization of Hezbollah into a full-fledged arm of Iran’s terrorist apparatus occurred through an influx of money, weaponry, personnel, military and explosives training, and tactical guidance. Iranian embassy officials were responsible for coordinating radical

Shi’a activities within Lebanon at the behest of the Iranian senior leadership.¹⁹ The Iranian ambassador in Damascus and the IRGC commander in the Bekaa Valley worked closely with the Council of Lebanon, an Iranian-created committee of radical Lebanese Shi’a leaders, to coordinate all fundamentalist activities in Lebanon.²⁰ Some Iranian “auxiliaries” were even embedded in Hezbollah units in the Bekaa Valley, with the IRGC sharing Hezbollah’s communications and support network.²¹

Nor was the symbiotic relationship between Iran and Hezbollah premised purely along the military and terrorism dimension. Hezbollah also adheres the ideological, cultural, and religious tenets of the Iranian Revolution and the guardianship of the jurist, *waliyat al-faqih*. Hezbollah extremists “responded with zeal to Khomeini’s revolutionary message.”²² The group shared a desire to establish a fundamentalist state and export it worldwide. In fact, early expansion in Hezbollah’s base was likely due to the popular preachings of Iranian-trained clerics and a “fanatical devotion to Ayatollah Khomeini and the cause of sparking an Islamic revolution in Lebanon,” the CIA concluded.²³ Shi’a religious hierarchy in Lebanon was tightly bound to Iran, “historically in both a religious and kinship sense.”²⁴ Lebanese clerics received training in Iran, married into Iranian clerical families, and acted as mouthpieces and amplifiers of Iranian theological discourse, with the revolution “providing a well-formulated extremist ideology and a model for Shia fundamentalist activism.”²⁵

Beyond the educational and familial pathways, Iranian ideology permeated Lebanon by means of official channels. In addition to providing paramilitary and terrorist skills, the IRGC in Lebanon provided political and religious indoctrination.²⁶ Thus, the CIA concluded in 1987, although “an Islamic fundamentalist movement probably would have developed in Lebanon without outside support [...] Iranian aid has been a major stimulant.”²⁷

Over the years, U.S. government sources have variously referred to Hezbollah and its leaders as a “surrogate,”²⁸ “puppet,”²⁹ “the vanguard of an Iranian-influenced revolutionary movement,”³⁰ and “Iran’s most important and longest-standing non-state partner and a core member of Tehran’s ‘Axis of Resistance.’”³¹ Nonetheless, Hezbollah developed even from its earliest days along two often overlapping but sometimes competing tracks. For all of their pro-Iranian spirit, Hezbollah’s leaders also sought to create an independent, domestic movement aligned with Iran but independent to make its own decisions. While considering

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itself “a part of the Islamic nation in the world,” the organization’s founding statement said it intended “to determine our fate by our own hands.”³²

U.S. government sources were well aware of Hezbollah’s chimeric attitude: “The Hizballah movement does not depend on Iran for its existence. Shia fundamentalism, whetted by decades of Shia deprivation and a brutal Israeli occupation, has firmly taken root in Lebanon and has achieved a momentum of its own,” the CIA observed in a 1985 report.³³ Although a ceasing of Iranian support to Hezbollah would slow the latter’s growth, Hezbollah could satisfy its material needs on its own, if the need arose.³⁴ Hezbollah was also asserting independence of action, carrying out operations without Iranian foreknowledge.³⁵ In an assessment of Iranian sponsorship of terrorism, the CIA found “mounting evidence that the Lebanese Shias—although respectful of Khomeini and the Iranian revolution—will no longer tolerate Iranian attempts to dictate their policies.”³⁶ Case in point was the release of hostages. Tehran would be unlikely to be able to force Hezbollah to free all its hostages in Lebanon, particularly when the proxy’s goals did not coincide with Tehran’s.³⁷ Hezbollah, it seemed, had “become an autonomous terrorist problem in its own right.”³⁸

Mohammed Hussein Fadlallah, Hezbollah’s foremost cleric in the group’s early years, was particularly adamant about maintaining autonomy from Iran. Fadlallah maintained that the “revolutionary circumstances” in Iran were fundamentally different than those in Lebanon, and that Hezbollah would consult with — but not pander to — Iran.³⁹ Following Syria’s occupation of West Beirut in February 1986, Fadlallah went so far as to block Hezbollah from executing Tehran’s order to attack the Syrians.⁴⁰ As a result, Iranian leaders “circumvent[ed] Fadlallah’s authority by dealing directly with Hizballah officials through the Iranian embassies in Beirut and Damascus and through the Iranian Revolutionary Guard contingent in the Bekaa Valley.”⁴¹ Over time, Fadlallah fell out of favor with Tehran, and within Hezbollah leadership circles, over his refusal to subscribe to the Iranian concept of *waliyat al-faqih*.

But one of Fadlallah’s proteges, Imad Mughniyeh, who founded the group’s Islamic Jihad terrorist unit, frequently consulted with Iranian intelligence and IRGC officials, according to U.S. intelligence sources. An Iranian official sat on the Hezbollah Shura Council in 1992, and around the same time two Iranian officials were members of Hezbollah’s military committee. The IRGC ran Hezbollah’s intelligence planning section until 1989, when a Lebanese candidate was finally deemed capable of doing the job. Over the years, senior IRGC-QF and Ministry of Intelligence and Security (MOIS) officials would periodically visit Lebanon to work with Hezbollah and assess the group’s security.⁴² And when Mughniyeh wanted to target U.S. interests, he would seek Iranian consent. For example, in December 1991 the CIA worried over intelligence suggesting that Hezbollah planned to attack U.S. interests in Beirut in the ensuing weeks. Iran would likely oppose more Hezbollah kidnappings, the CIA assessed, since Tehran wanted to preserve its political capital from the recent release of some hostages. However, the agency warned, “It is possible that Tehran has approved low-level terrorist operations against US interests—such as sniper attacks—to allow Hezbollah elements to vent their animosity toward the United States. These Hezbollah elements may include former hostage holder Imad Mughniyeh.”

Two decades after the U.S. Marines barracks bombing, testimony in U.S. federal court established that Hezbollah carried out the bombings with Syrian and Iranian oversight. According to the testimony of former U.S. military officials, two days after the bombing — on October 25, 1983 — the chief of naval intelligence notified the deputy chief of naval operations of an intercepted message from September 26, 1983, just a few weeks before the barracks bombing. Sent from MOIS in Tehran, the message instructed the Iranian ambassador in Damascus, Ali Akbar Mohtashemi, to contact Hussein al-Musawi and to direct him to “take spectacular action against the United States Marines” and the multinational coalition in Lebanon.⁴³ In the words of Col. Timothy Geraghty, commander of the Marine unit in Beirut at the time of the bombing, “If there was ever a 24-karat gold document, this was it. This is not something from



Photo above: Ali Mekdad, Lebanese MP for the Shiite Hezbollah party, speaks to press on July 11, 2019. The lawmakers from the Lebanese Shiite movement condemned U.S. sanctions against three of its officials, saying they would “change nothing” in the group’s rejection of U.S. policies in the region. Photo by JOSEPH EID/AFP via Getty Images.

“Hezbollah is both part of and above the sectarian political party system in Lebanon, participating in the system from within and functioning as a non-state actor pursuing its own goals, independent of and often at loggerheads with those of the central government.”

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the third cousin of the fourth wife of Muhammad the taxicab driver.”⁴⁴ U.S. signals intelligence had caught Iranian officials instructing a Hezbollah leader to carry out an attack targeting U.S. Marines in Lebanon, but the military bureaucracy prevented that information from getting where it needed to be in time to prevent the attack.⁴⁵

Years later, a former Hezbollah member would testify in a U.S. federal court case that Ambassador Mohtashemi followed orders and contacted an IRGC member named Kanani, who commanded its Lebanon headquarters.⁴⁶ Mughniyeh and his brother-in-law, Mustafa Badreddine, were named operation leaders after a meeting that included Kanani, Musawi, and then-Hezbollah security official Hassan Nasrallah. Planning meetings were held at the Iranian embassy in Damascus, often chaired by Ambassador Mohtashemi, who helped establish Hezbollah in the first instance.⁴⁷

IV. Hezbollah’s Multiple Allegiances and Objectives

Hezbollah is one of the dominant political parties in Lebanon, even as the group also maintains its own militia and a stockpile of advanced weapons systems — including precision-guided missiles — that it controls and deploys independent of the Lebanese government or Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF). Hezbollah also runs social, educational, health, and religious institutions in the country, which provide a wide range of services to its constituents beyond the often-meager services provided by the Lebanese government. Hezbollah members have held cabinet posts in the government and several group officials are members of parliament, even as the group makes life-or-death decisions for the Lebanese people in service of its own interests, often at Iran’s behest, independent of the LAF and the central government.

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independent of and often at loggerheads with those of the central government.

At the same time, Hezbollah is also a pan-Shi’a movement and an Iranian proxy group, rounding out the foundation and context for the group’s radical Shi’a ideology. In 1985, Hezbollah’s original political platform included the establishment of an Islamic republic in Lebanon as a central pillar, although this emphasis has since been downplayed.⁴⁸ Also prominent in this document is the fight against “Western imperialism” and the continued conflict with Israel.

By virtue of its ideological commitment to Ayatollah Khomeini’s revolutionary doctrine of *waliyat al-faqih*, Hezbollah is committed simultaneously to the decrees of Iranian clerics, the Lebanese state, its sectarian Shi’a community, and fellow Shi’a abroad. Hezbollah’s other (often competing) goals have included resisting Israeli occupation of Lebanese territory and contesting, and ultimately seeking to eliminate, Israel’s very existence; promoting the standing of Shi’a communities worldwide; undermining Arab states with Shi’a minorities in an effort to export the Iranian Shi’a revolution; and serving as the long arm of Iran in coordination with the IRGC-QF. The consequences of these competing ideological drivers was clear after Hezbollah dragged both Israel and Lebanon into a war neither state wanted by crossing the U.N.-demarcated “Blue Line” border between the two countries in July 2006, killing three Israeli soldiers while kidnapping two more. Hezbollah’s multiple and sometimes mutually exclusive goals came to light again when the group sent forces to defend the regime of Bashar al-Assad in Syria, a decision which itself gave rise to several more such situations when the group’s fighting in Syria boomeranged back into Lebanon.

To be sure, Hezbollah cannot be truly understood without an appreciation for its political, social, and military activities in Lebanon. But its activities outside the country are equally fundamental, including its criminal enterprises, terrorist networks, and military units deployed beyond Lebanon’s borders.

V. Personnel Decisions Underscore Regional Commitments

Hezbollah's transformation into a regional actor is underscored by the assignment of key personnel from the group's Southern Command along the border with Israel to new fronts around the region, including Iraq, Syria, and Yemen.

Hezbollah has long supported other Shi'a militant groups in the region, trained their operatives, and periodically participated in terrorist attacks with members of other Shi'a militant groups at the behest of Iran. As early as 1985, the CIA reported two years later, Hezbollah ran a training camp near Janta, Lebanon, for over 2,000 Shi'a militants, including about 60 from Saudi Arabia and Bahrain who were trained at the facility before being sent back to the Gulf states to conduct operations there.⁴⁹ And as early as December 1983, Lebanese Hezbollah and Iraqi Dawa operatives together attacked a series of targets in Kuwait.⁵⁰ Later, a couple of years into the Iraq war and with Iran deeply concerned about U.S. forces in both Afghanistan and Iraq, Iran called on Hezbollah to take on more regional responsibilities separate from the group's core interests and activities in Lebanon and targeting Israel. The commitment with which Hezbollah responded to the call was most evident from key personnel assignments as Hezbollah dedicated top commanders to the group's new, regional missions.

Even before Hezbollah's 2006 war with Israel, the group acceded to Iranian requests to step up its role training Iraqi Shi'a militants. According to information revealed by the U.S. Treasury Department, sometime in 2005 "Iran asked Hezbollah to form a group to train Iraqis to fight Coalition Forces in Iraq. In response, Hassan Nasrallah established a covert Hezbollah unit to train and advise Iraqi militants" from Jaish al-Mahdi (JAM), and JAM Special Groups including Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq.⁵¹ In May 2006, Hezbollah sent a master trainer — Ali Musa Daqduq al-Musawi — to Iran to coordinate the training program and make periodic visits to Iraq.⁵² Daqduq was a Hezbollah special operations commander who had been a senior operative since 1983 and at one point headed Nasrallah's protective detail.⁵³ In Iraq, Daqduq served under Yusuf Hashim, the Hezbollah official in charge of Unit 3800, the designation for Hezbollah's unit operating in Iraq.⁵⁴

In Yemen, too, the State Department explained, Hezbollah dispatched trusted and proven commanders "to provide training, materiel, and personnel" — alongside Iranian IRGC-QF officers — in support of Houthi rebels.⁵⁵ According to the U.S. government, Khalil Harb, a former special operations commander and a close adviser to Nasrallah, oversaw Hezbollah's activities in Yemen — managing the transfer of funds to the organization within the country — and travels to Tehran to coordinate them with Iranian officials.⁵⁶ Hezbollah also sent battle-hardened commanders like Abu Ali Tabtabai, a senior Hezbollah commander first sent from southern Lebanon where he faced off with Israeli forces in Syria, but was then quickly redeployed from there to Yemen to upgrade the Houthis' guerilla tactics training program.⁵⁷

Hezbollah even dispatched operatives stationed in southern Lebanon to Egypt, where a Hezbollah cell first focused on smuggling Iranian weapons through Egypt to Hamas in the Gaza Strip and later shifted to target tourist and other destinations in the country. Muhammad Qabalan, a former Hezbollah infantry platoon commander, headed the unit in Egypt, working together with another Hezbollah operative formerly stationed in south Lebanon, Muhammad Mansour.⁵⁸

Then there is the startling case of Syria. Around 2013, Hezbollah went so far as to make significant structural changes to its military command to oversee its massive commitment in Syria. The group added two new military commands — the first on the Lebanese-Syrian border and the second within Syria itself — to its existing ones in southern and eastern Lebanon.⁵⁹ Hezbollah then transferred key personnel from its traditionally paramount Southern Command, along Lebanon's border with Israel. Chief among these was Mustafa Badreddine, who took over the leadership of Hezbollah's foreign terrorist operations from his cousin, Imad Mughniyeh, after the latter was killed in 2008. Around 2012, Badreddine began coordinating Hezbollah military activities in Syria and quickly assumed the dual-hatted position of overseeing Hezbollah foreign operations as well as the group's Syrian command. Badreddine was a veteran and senior Hezbollah operative implicated in the 1983 bombing of U.S. barracks in Beirut, the 2005 assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri, and terrorist bombings in Kuwait in the 1980s, among other attacks. His appointment was the strongest sign Hezbollah could give of its commitment to Syria's civil war. Indeed, according to U.S. intelligence officials, Nasrallah hesitated when IRGC-QF leaders first asked him to deploy Hezbollah forces to Syria to defend the Assad regime.

“Hezbollah’s most significant military commitment, by far, has been to Syria in defense of the Assad regime. This has involved thousands of Hezbollah boots on the ground and the training and commanding of other Shi’a militants.”

According to a *Wall Street Journal* account, “Nasrallah only agreed to the deployments after he received a personal appeal from Iran’s supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, who made clear that Tehran expected Hezbollah to act decisively.”⁶⁰ Once Nasrallah made the decision to engage in the Syrian civil war — first in 2011 and then in a bigger, more organized fashion in mid-2012 — he personally assumed responsibility for overseeing the activities.⁶¹ Indeed, Nasrallah has directed the group’s activities in Syria since at least September 2011, when he and Badreddine began holding weekly strategic coordination meetings with Assad in Damascus.⁶² The organization’s intense focus on the Syrian conflict was the main reason for its blacklisting by the U.S. Department of the Treasury in 2012.⁶³

VI. Hezbollah Operational Activities across the Region

Deploying key commanders to priority conflict zones facilitated the group’s ability to commit significant added value to its and Iran’s allies in these conflicts. Hezbollah’s contributions vary from large and small military deployments, training local militias, capacity building efforts focused on weapons or technology transfers, propaganda and disinformation, cyber training and campaigns, illicit financial activities, intelligence collection efforts, and even terrorist plots and preoperational surveillance in the region.

Deploying Troops to Foreign Battlefields

Hezbollah’s most significant military commitment, by far, has been to Syria in defense of the Assad regime. This has involved thousands of Hezbollah boots on the ground and the training and commanding of other Shi’a militants from Syria, Iraq, Pakistan, and Afghanistan, among others.

Cognizant of the domestic challenges its fighting in Syria would create, Hezbollah first tried to hide its deployment to defend the Assad regime. But in August 2012, the U.S.

Treasury Department re-designated Hezbollah, this time exposing the group’s support for Assad. At the time, the department noted how Hezbollah’s “extensive support to the Syrian government’s violent suppression of the Syrian people” underscored the group’s involvement in a conflict beyond Lebanon’s borders and “exposes the true nature of this terrorist organization and its destabilizing presence in the region.” Beyond stressing the group’s status as a regional actor, Treasury also pointed to the fact that Nasrallah himself “has overseen Hezbollah’s efforts to help the Syrian regime’s violent crackdown on the Syrian civilian population.”⁶⁴ After an August 2013 speech in which Nasrallah defended the group’s activities in Syria as part of its “resistance” against Israel, one Shiite Lebanese satirist commented: “Either the fighters have lost Palestine on the map and think it is in Syria (or) they were informed that the road to Jerusalem runs through Qusayr and Homs,” locations in Syria where Hezbollah has fought with Assad loyalists against Sunni rebels.⁶⁵

Up to 10,000 Hezbollah fighters have been deployed to Syria at a time, though the number of fighters in the country was typically lower than that as fighters rotated in and out on months-long tours of duty. Hezbollah trained other Shi’a militants to fight in Syria (see below), but the group’s deployment to Syria stands out not only for the number of personnel deployed but also for their direct involvement in fighting across the country, from areas near the Lebanese border up north to Aleppo and down south near the border with Jordan and the Golan Heights. At Iran’s behest, Hezbollah fighters played a decisive role turning the tide of the civil war in favor of the Assad regime. Naturally, given the extent of its battlefield deployments, Hezbollah suffered significant losses — more, in fact, than the group lost in all its battles and skirmishes with Israeli forces. An estimated 1,600-2,000 Hezbollah troops were killed in action in Syria, which, based on typical military estimates, suggests 4,800-6,000 wounded.⁶⁶ Senior Hezbollah commanders oversee the group’s military activities in Syria. For example, the U.S. Treasury Department reported that Ibrahim Aqil and Fuad Shukr, both of whom sit on Hezbollah’s Jihad Council, the group’s highest

military body, have “played a vital role in Hezbollah’s military campaign in Syria by aiding Hezbollah fighters and pro-Syrian regime troops against Syrian opposition forces in battles inside Syria.”⁶⁷ In return for Hezbollah and Iran’s contributions to the preservation of the Assad regime, Syria has allowed Hezbollah and Iranian operatives to establish a network of mostly Syrian operatives along the Syrian Golan in an effort to open a new front with Israel.⁶⁸

Even prior to the Syrian civil war, Hezbollah fighters began deploying around the region — albeit in much smaller numbers — to support Iranian objectives in places like Iraq, and later, Yemen. A 2009 Australian report on Hezbollah’s Islamic Jihad Organization (also known as the External Services Organization, or ESO) concluded that Hezbollah’s activities in Iraq went much further than simply training Iraqi Shi’a militants tied to Iran: “Hezbollah has established an insurgent capability in Iraq, engaging in assassinations, kidnappings and bombings. The Hezbollah units have been set up with the encouragement and resources of Iran’s Revolutionary Guards al Qods Brigades.”⁶⁹

The U.S. military also uncovered evidence suggesting Hezbollah may have run operations of its own in Iraq. A U.S. intelligence report includes the assessment of an Iraqi militant who believed one of his Hezbollah trainers in Iran seemed to have previously been involved in covert activities in Iraq.⁷⁰ But the clearest evidence came from the capture in southern Iraq of Ali Musa Daqduq al-Musawi, the senior Hezbollah operative sent to Iraq, together with Asa’ib al-Ahl-Haq leader Qais al-Khazali, in March 2007. One document seized in the raid in particular caught the attention of U.S. analysts: a 22-page memorandum that “detailed the planning, preparation, approval process and conduct of the [January 2007 Karbala Provisional Joint Coordination Center] operation,” among others.⁷¹

Daqduq, the documents revealed, was personally involved in violent operations in Iraq. For example, in his personal diary Daqduq recorded his involvement in a plot to kidnap a British soldier. “The operation is to infiltrate two brothers to the base to detain a British soldier in the first brigade from the bathrooms by drugging him,” Daqduq wrote.⁷² Daqduq noted meeting with Special Groups operatives who described the attack, which failed when Iraqi soldiers intervened. This was not the only

attack targeting British forces in which he was involved — other documents refer to attacks on British bases at the Basra Palace and the Shatt al-Arab Hotel.⁷³

In one entry, Daqduq recorded meeting with Special Groups operatives who were involved in attacks targeting fellow Iraqis as well as coalition forces in Diyala Province with improvised explosive device (IED) bombings and small arms fire. He wrote about IED bombings in the first person, suggesting he was either personally involved in the attacks on the ground or, at a minimum, saw himself as integral to the plot: “Met with the brothers[,] the observers of Diyalah province and I listened regarding the operations. ... We conducted eight explosive charge operations on both sides.”⁷⁴

Hezbollah continued to aid Shi’a militias in Iraq, sending small numbers of skilled trainers to help fight the Islamic State and defend Shi’a shrines. In June 2014, Nasrallah pledged, “We are ready to sacrifice martyrs in Iraq five times more than what we sacrificed in Syria in order to protect shrines,” noting that Iraqi holy sites “are much more important” than Shiite shrines in Syria.⁷⁵ Nasrallah was surely exaggerating, but to ensure the group was able to follow through on the spirit of his commitment, key Hezbollah operatives and supporters have invested in commercial front organizations in Iraq that provide the group both financial support and organizational infrastructure. For example, Husayn Ali Faour, described by the U.S. government as “a member of Hezbollah’s Islamic Jihad” overseas terrorism unit, has also worked with Hezbollah financier Adnan Tabaja “to secure and manage construction, oil, and other projects in Iraq for Al-Inmaa Engineering and Contracting.”⁷⁶

Hezbollah also deployed senior operatives to Yemen. Some, like Abu Ali Tabtabai, would be deployed to Syria first, only to be redeployed to Yemen.⁷⁷ While Tabtabai oversaw training and provision of materiel to the Houthis, his assignment also included overseeing provision of Hezbollah “personnel in support of its destabilizing regional activities,” according to the State Department.⁷⁸ According to Saudi officials, Hezbollah operatives fired a ballistic missile toward Riyadh international airport in November 2017. “It was an Iranian missile, launched by Hezbollah, from territory occupied by the Houthis in Yemen,” Saudi Foreign Minister Adel al-Jubeir told CNN.⁷⁹

Photo right: A man holds a poster of Lebanon’s Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah and Shiite Houthi movement’s leader Abdul-Malik al-Houthi during a celebration by Houthi rebels to mark the anniversary of the birth of the Prophet Muhammad, October 29, 2020.

Photo by Hani Al-Ansi/picture alliance via Getty Images.

“At least some Hezbollah commanders are open about the group’s intent to expand its regional adventurism once it can begin to draw down forces in Syria. ... ‘After we are done with Syria, we will start with Yemen; Hezbollah is already there.’”

Others, like Khalil Harb, a former Hezbollah special operations commander and a close adviser to Nasrallah, oversaw Hezbollah’s activities in Yemen — managing the transfer of funds to the organization within the country — and traveled frequently to Tehran to coordinate Hezbollah activities with Iranian officials.⁸⁰ Harb already had experience overseeing Hezbollah’s regional activities, serving for several years around 2003-06 as head of the group’s activities in Syria, Jordan, Israel, and Egypt.⁸¹ Some would not only advise but actually operate rocket systems firing salvos at Saudi Arabia, while others were deployed to critical battlefields. As the Houthis closed in on Marib in May 2021, for example, a Saudi airstrike reportedly killed Hezbollah commander Mustafa al-Gharawi.⁸² In 2019, Nasrallah conceded that Hezbollah operatives were on the ground in Yemen, adding: “We are not ashamed that we have martyrs from Hezbollah in Yemen.”⁸³

At least some Hezbollah commanders are open about the group’s intent to expand its regional adventurism once it can begin to draw down forces in Syria. Writing in *Foreign Affairs*, Alexander Corbeil and Amarnath Amarasingam recall interviewing a Hezbollah commander who boasted: “After we are done with Syria, we will start with Yemen; Hezbollah is already there,” he said. “Who do you think fires Tochka missiles into Saudi Arabia? It’s not the Houthis in their sandals, it’s us.”⁸⁴

Training Regional Shi’a Militants

Hezbollah’s hard turn toward a more activist regional posture first came in the context of the Iraq war. “Generally,” U.S. military intelligence assessed in 2010, the IRGC-QF “directs and supports groups actually executing attacks, thereby maintaining plausible deniability within the international community.”⁸⁵ Much as it did for Hezbollah in Lebanon in the 1980s, the IRGC-QF set out to build up an array of Shi’a militias in Iraq. The IRGC-QF did some training itself, but it often used Hezbollah to

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Hezbollah’s hard turn toward a more activist regional posture first came in the context of the Iraq war.



provide training and operational supervision on its behalf. The outsourcing of training to Hezbollah spoke volumes about Iran's regard for the group's professionalism as terrorist trainers. The use of Hezbollah also averted Iraqi militants' complaints about the religious indoctrination included in the Iranian training programs, which were generally uninspiring and taught by sheikhs who did not speak Arabic well.⁸⁶

Hezbollah's activities in Iraq following the 2003 U.S. invasion were a function of the group's close alliance with Iran in general and the IRGC-QF in particular. Tehran's strategy in Iraq — and Hezbollah's role in that strategy as Iran's primary militant proxy group — was a logical extension of Iran's covert activities in Iraq and the region throughout the 1980s and 1990s, including proxies such as Hezbollah, the Dawa Party, and the Badr Organization.⁸⁷

Mirroring the creation of Unit 1800, a unit dedicated to supporting Palestinian terrorist groups and targeting Israel, Hezbollah created Unit 3800, a unit dedicated to supporting Iraqi Shi'a terrorist groups targeting multinational forces in Iraq. The unit, established by Hezbollah leader Nasrallah⁸⁸ at Iran's request, trained and advised Iraqi militant groups. Almost immediately following the U.S. invasion of Iraq, reports emerged indicating Hezbollah operatives were reaching out to re-establish ties to Iraqi Shi'a groups. A July 29, 2003, U.S. intelligence report citing Israeli military intelligence stated that Hezbollah "military activists" were trying to make contact with Muqtada al-Sadr and his Mahdi Army. By late August they had succeeded, according to a report prepared by a U.S. military analyst. Based on information from a source with "direct access to the reported information," the report claimed Hezbollah had assembled a team of 30 to 40 operatives in Najaf "in support of Moqtada Sadr's Shia paramilitary group." Hezbollah was both recruiting and training new members of the Mahdi Army, the report added.⁸⁹

In Tehran, Daqduq and Hashim met with the commander and deputy commander of IRGC-QF special external operations. In the year before British Special Forces captured him in Basra in late 2007, Daqduq made four trips to Iraq. He reported back to the IRGC-QF on the Special Groups' use of mortars and rockets, their manufacture and use of IEDs, and kidnapping operations. His overall instructions were simple: "He was tasked to organize the Special Groups in ways that mirrored how Hezbollah was organized in Lebanon."⁹⁰

Hezbollah's training mission in Yemen has been much smaller, but no less effective. According to detained Houthi fighters, Hezbollah trained dozens of Houthi recruits at a time in two-month basic training courses in Yemen before the recruits were dispatched to the battlefield.⁹¹ A video that gained media attention in early 2016 purported to show a Hezbollah trainer addressing a group of Houthi forces in Yemen about training for assassination operations targeting Saudi Arabia.⁹² Around late 2014, when Iran instituted twice-weekly flights to Yemen on Mahan Air — an Iranian airline the IRGC-QF uses to move personnel and materiel to conflict zones⁹³ — Yemeni officials noted that "Lebanese Hezbollah and Iranian trainers entered on these flights and up to 300 Yemenis were sent to Iran for training."⁹⁴ A U.N. Panel of Experts similarly documented Houthi recruits being sent to Iran for training, as well.⁹⁵ In interviews with military analyst Michael Knights, Yemeni political and military leaders reported that "Hezbollah provided mentoring and training in infantry tactics, ATGM [anti-tank guided missile] operations, offensive mine warfare, and anti-shipping attacks."⁹⁶ Indeed, Hezbollah's training relationship with the Houthis appears to go back several years. Speaking to the *Financial Times* in 2015, a Hezbollah commander said the training relationship dates back to 2005. "They trained with us in Iran, then we trained them here [in Lebanon] and in Yemen."⁹⁷

At the same time, Hezbollah continued training Shi'a militants from elsewhere in the Gulf, including Bahrain and Kuwait. For example, in 2018 Bahraini authorities arrested over 100 Shi'a militants who reportedly received militant training from Iranian proxy groups like Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq in Iraq and Hezbollah in Lebanon. In a statement, the authorities noted that "This is done through recruiting terrorist elements in Bahrain, arranging and coordinating training for them in terrorist camps, and providing them with funds, firearms, and explosive devices."⁹⁸ In Iraq and Lebanon, authorities charged, the militants received weapons and explosives training "at the behest of Iranian regime leaders who ordered the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps elements to unify the Bahrain-based terrorist elements to carry out their plots and acts of terrorism against Bahrain."⁹⁹ Similarly, in 2016 a Kuwaiti court convicted 23 militants on charges of spying for Iran and Hezbollah, buying and storing weapons and explosives, and undergoing Hezbollah militant training in Lebanon.¹⁰⁰

Meanwhile, in Syria Hezbollah has been training and overseeing Shi'a militants from around the region. Together with the IRGC, Hezbollah forces in Syria took on a leading role not only overseeing the deployment of other Shi'a militias but also

“As Hezbollah and IRGC-QF operations become more and more interconnected ... Hezbollah took on additional roles running illicit financial schemes intended to evade sanctions, fund the IRGC-QF, and through it finance key Iranian allies and proxies.”

forming local Shi'a militias allied with Iran. In May 2014, IRGC Gen. Hossein Hamedani declared the formation of “a second Hezbollah in Syria.” In early 2014, several Shiite militias in Syria began to call themselves, *Hezbollah fi Suriya*, or “Hezbollah in Syria.” Inspired by the success of Lebanese Hezbollah, the objective was to build a Syrian wing of the movement, to “carry out ideological as well as other regional power-projection goals.”¹⁰¹ While most of their actions so far have been limited to Syria, Hezbollah fi Suriya has made calls to unify with others in Iraq as well. The Hezbollahization of these groups, in name, structure, and allegiance, signifies a major accomplishment for Tehran, allowing Iran to preserve harder-core influence and more effectively project power within Syria.¹⁰²

Regional Illicit Financial Activities

Hezbollah's regional activities expanded just as sanctions began to truly affect Iran's ability to finance its own and its proxies' illicit activities at will, which also coincided with other events that cut into Tehran's budget, like drops in the price of oil. This led Hezbollah to double down on its own transnational criminal moneymaking enterprises to fund its activities,¹⁰³ some of which, like Hezbollah's sharply increased regional trade in Captagon, specifically undermine security and public health in the Middle East.¹⁰⁴

But as Hezbollah and IRGC-QF operations become more and more interconnected around the region, Hezbollah took on additional roles running illicit financial schemes intended to evade sanctions, fund the IRGC-QF, and through it finance key Iranian allies and proxies like the Assad regime, Hamas, the Houthis, Iraqi militias, and Hezbollah itself.

“Over the past year,” the Treasury Department reported in September 2019,¹⁰⁵ “the IRGC-QF has moved oil worth hundreds of millions of dollars or more through [an illicit shipping] network for the benefit of the brutal Assad regime, Hezbollah, and other illicit actors.” The IRGC-QF and Hezbollah directed this shipping network, which benefits both financially, Treasury noted.¹⁰⁶

In fact, the precipitant event for this “oil-for-terror”¹⁰⁷ network was the May 2018 Treasury designation of Valiollah Seif,¹⁰⁸ Iran's Central Bank governor, and Ali Tarzali, assistant director of the Central Bank's International Department. As the Iraq war ended and Shi'a fighters shifted to Syria, Hezbollah developed extensive illicit financial networks in Iraq. Among the entities targeted in this 2018 action were Al-Bilad Islamic Bank in Iraq and the bank's chief executive, along with senior Hezbollah official Mohammad Qasir. “Iran's Central Bank Governor covertly funneled millions of dollars on behalf of the IRGC-QF through Iraq-based al-Bilad Islamic Bank to enrich and support the violent and radical agenda of Hezbollah,” the Treasury secretary explained.¹⁰⁹ Qasir served as “a critical conduit”¹¹⁰ for the IRGC-QF payments to Hezbollah, and with this illicit financing scheme exposed, Qasir and his IRGC-QF counterparts shifted toward a trade-based financing scheme involving smuggled Iranian oil.

Six months later, in November 2018, the Treasury Department exposed¹¹¹ a convoluted¹¹² Iranian illicit financing scheme in which Qasir and other Hezbollah officials, working together with Iranian operatives, Russian¹¹³ companies, and the Central Bank of Syria, facilitated the shipment of millions of barrels of Iranian oil to the Assad regime in Syria. The Assad regime would then facilitate the movement of hundreds of millions of U.S. dollars to the IRGC-QF, which would transfer¹¹⁴ the funds to Hamas and Hezbollah. In a letter¹¹⁵ to a senior official at the Central Bank of Iran, Qasir (aka Mr. Fadi) and a Syrian associate confirmed receipt of \$63 million as part of a scheme to benefit Hezbollah.

The Treasury Department revealed¹¹⁶ that Qasir heads Unit 108, “the Hezbollah unit responsible for facilitating the transfer of weapons, technology, and other support from Syria to Lebanon.” Leading Unit 108 made Qasir the perfect person to coordinate Iran's oil-for-terror scheme. He was also a logical choice because he came from a dedicated Hezbollah family: one brother was the group's first suicide bomber, while another is the son-in-law of Hezbollah leader Nasrallah.¹¹⁷ Lineage aside, Qasir's close relationship with then-IRGC-QF



Photo above: An Iranian flag flutters on board the *Adrian Darya* oil tanker, formerly known as *Grace 1*, off the coast of Gibraltar on August 18, 2019. Gibraltar rejected a U.S. demand to seize the Iranian oil tanker at the center of a diplomatic dispute as it prepared to leave the British overseas territory after weeks of detention. [Photo by JOHNNY BUGEJA/AFP via Getty Images.](#)

commander Qassem Soleimani, Syria's Bashar al-Assad, and a long list of other key Iranian operatives made him the man for the job. In February 2019, Qasir appeared as a notetaker¹¹⁸ in photographs and video clips of President Assad's secret visit to Tehran for meetings with Iranian President Hassan Rouhani and Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei. For operational security, Assad's visit reportedly dispensed with traditional protocols. But Soleimani selected¹¹⁹ Qasir, the head of Hezbollah's most sophisticated smuggling operations, to accompany him to these meetings.

Qasir was able to rely on a coterie of Hezbollah operatives to help him manage Iran's trade-based terror finance scheme. One of Qasir's associates is Hezbollah operative Mohammad Qasim al-Bazzal,¹²⁰ a "key financier for Hezbollah and the IRGC-QF."¹²¹ Al-Bazzal uses a network of companies "to finance, coordinate, and obscure various illicit IRGC-QF-linked oil shipments."¹²² Among the companies he employs, according to the U.S. government,

are Syria-based Talaqi Group,¹²³ which he co-founded with his wife,¹²⁴ and other "terrorist financing enterprises" he controls such as Hokoul S.A.L Offshore,¹²⁵ Nagham Al Hayat,¹²⁶ Tawafuk,¹²⁷ and ALUMIX.¹²⁸ Al-Bazzal oversaw Talaqi Group and ALUMIX's business shipping aluminum to Iran, and in early 2019 attempted¹²⁹ to evade U.S. sanctions by removing his name as owner and shareholder from Talaqi Group documents.

In September 2019, the Treasury Department took action¹³⁰ targeting multiple components of Iran's illicit oil shipping network, noting that it was "directed by and financially supports the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps-Qods Force (IRGC-QF) and its terrorist proxy Hezbollah." More specifically, it exposed the fact that Hezbollah officials oversaw and ran¹³¹ this network of IRGC-QF front companies for the express purpose of concealing Iran's role in selling crude oil, condensate, and gas oil¹³² for the benefit of the Assad regime, Hezbollah, and other Iranian proxies.

“Hezbollah continues to play central roles in IRGC-QF financing schemes to support its proxies.”

Qasir, al-Bazzal, and their companies featured prominently in the exposed network, along with Ali Qasir, Mohammad Qasir’s nephew. Based in Tehran, Ali Qasir was serving as both a Hezbollah representative¹³³ to Iran and as Talaqi Group’s managing director. In these capacities, he “assigned maritime vessels to deliver shipments for the terrorist network based on the IRGC-QF’s guidance.”¹³⁴ For example, Ali Qasir played¹³⁵ central roles in the *Adrian Darya 1* episode, including working with others to cover expenses and facilitate Iranian oil shipments to Syria for the benefit of the IRGC-QF. From his perch in Tehran, Ali Qasir has also represented¹³⁶ Lebanon-based Hokoul S.A.L. Offshore in negotiations over its supply of Iranian crude oil to Syria.

While relying heavily on these and other Hezbollah officials and front companies to broker the contracts, the sprawling oil smuggling network is overseen by IRGC-QF official and former Iranian Minister of Petroleum Rostam Qasemi.¹³⁷ Qasemi, who also heads the Iranian-Syrian Economic Relations Development Committee, relies on trusted associates like Mohammad Qasir’s Hezbollah network and his son, Morteza Qasemi,¹³⁸ to finalize the illicit Iranian oil smuggling contracts, including some they attempted to pass off¹³⁹ as Iraqi-origin. In October 2020, the U.S. Rewards for Justice¹⁴⁰ program posted a \$10 million reward¹⁴¹ for information on the Hezbollah illicit financial network run by Mohammad Qasir, Ali Qasir, and Mohammad al-Bazzal.

Hezbollah continues to play central roles in IRGC-QF financing schemes to support its proxies. In June 2021, for example, the U.S. Treasury designated Iran-based Houthi financial logistician Sai’d al-Jamal, along with a group of facilitators from Turkey, the UAE, and Somalia, for running a network of front companies that together provided financing for the Houthis, the IRGC-QF, and others, including Hezbollah. Al-Jamal, Treasury added, “maintains connections to Hizballah and has worked with the group to send millions of dollars to support the Houthis.”¹⁴²

Procurement, Intelligence, Cyber, and Disinformation Operations

Given Hezbollah’s long history of weapons smuggling, it should not come as a surprise that Hezbollah plays a hands-on role in procuring weapons for itself and other Iranian proxy groups. Hezbollah procurement efforts in partnership with Iran significantly expanded in the context of the Syrian civil war.¹⁴³ By early 2015, U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) investigations into Hezbollah operations exposed some of the group’s extensive drug trafficking and money laundering activities, some of the proceeds of which, the DEA revealed, “are used to purchase weapons for Hizballah for its activities in Syria.”¹⁴⁴ Meanwhile, an FBI undercover operation targeting Iman al-Kobeisi revealed that Hezbollah procurement networks had matured to the point that Iran was seeking to leverage Hezbollah’s ability to gain access to weapons and sanctioned goods for its own direct needs.¹⁴⁵ In turn, Iran also took the opportunity to use Hezbollah networks to benefit some of its other proxies as well, including Houthi rebels in Yemen.

In 2013, Yemeni security forces interdicted the Iranian vessel *Jihan 1* off the coast of Yemen and arrested eight Yemenis and two Lebanese Hezbollah operatives. Believed to be heading for Houthi territory, the ship carried several tons of Iranian weapons and explosives.¹⁴⁶ In another case, U.S. authorities determined a Hezbollah weapons procurement officer sourcing IED components in China planned for the weapons to be sent to the Houthis in Yemen.¹⁴⁷

Similarly, Bahraini authorities disrupted two Hezbollah attempts to smuggle explosives into the country from Iran in August 2020. According to Bahrain’s Ministry of Interior, the suspects confessed Hezbollah was behind the operation.¹⁴⁸ Further west, Morocco broke off diplomatic relations with Iran over charges that Hezbollah operatives and Iranian agents, some of the latter under diplomatic cover, smuggled weapons to the Polisario Front in Western Sahara.¹⁴⁹ Morocco reportedly provided Iran names of Hezbollah operatives who visited Polisario-

controlled refugee camps “in order to supervise training courses, set up facilities and meet with Polisario officials.”¹⁵⁰

But Hezbollah has also engaged in other, still more covert regional exploits in close partnership with Iran, including intelligence collection and cyber and disinformation operations across the region. Consider, for example, the case of Iraq-based Hezbollah operative Muhammad Farhat. According to the U.S. Treasury Department, “as of 2017, Farhat was tasked with collecting security and intelligence information in Iraq and subsequently providing reports to senior Hezbollah and Iranian leadership.” He also helped a Hezbollah and IRGC-QF effort “to analyze and report on the Iraqi security situation.”¹⁵¹

In 2015, Kuwaiti authorities arrested a cell of several Kuwaiti and one Iranian Shi’a operatives on charges of spying for Iran and Hezbollah.¹⁵² That same year, an Israeli airstrike in the Golan Heights targeted a joint Hezbollah and IRGC-QF intelligence collection effort, killing Hezbollah’s Jihad Mughniyeh (son of the late Imad Mughniyeh) along with several other Hezbollah operatives and Iranian IRGC-QF Gen. Mohammad Ali Allahdadi.¹⁵³ Within a few short years, Israeli officials would reveal the new head of this Golan operation was none other than Ali Musa Daqduq al-Mousawi, the operative previously detained in Iraq.¹⁵⁴ In 2018, Bahraini authorities arrested a group of Shi’a suspected militants on charges of setting up a terrorist network in coordination with Iranian intelligence services.¹⁵⁵

But perhaps the most glaring example of Hezbollah’s regional intelligence operations is the case of U.S. military contract linguist Mariam Taha Thompson who, while stationed in Iraq, provided a Hezbollah contact intelligence about human sources involved in the January 2020 assassination of IRGC-QF commander Soleimani. According to her plea, Thompson admitted accessing and sharing dozens of intelligence files, including names of human assets, to provide to her Hezbollah contact.¹⁵⁶ Tellingly, what Hezbollah intelligence officers sought from Thompson was not information specific to Israel or Lebanon, but information of particular interest to Iran and its proxy network.

Hezbollah has long helped other Shi’a militant groups establish media and propaganda outlets, including television, radio, and online outlets. For example, both Kata’ib Hezbollah in Iraq and the Houthis in Yemen operate satellite television stations based out of Beirut, with support from Lebanese Hezbollah.¹⁵⁷ Now, Hezbollah also supports the disinformation

and cyber activities of Iranian proxy Shi’a militant groups across the region.

Separate from the cyber espionage and sophisticated malware operations Hezbollah has been implicated in, typically in concert with Iran,¹⁵⁸ the group also runs disinformation boot camps in Lebanon for the purpose of building up the “electronic armies” of Iran’s proxy groups around the region. “Since at least 2012,” *The Telegraph* reported in August 2020, “Hezbollah has been flying individuals into Lebanon for courses teaching participants how to digitally manipulate photographs, manage large numbers of fake social media accounts, make videos, avoid Facebook’s censorship, and effectively spread disinformation online.”¹⁵⁹ Students from Bahrain, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, and Syria were among the thousands of “Iran-backed social media activists” who attended the 10-day courses, which were taught by Hezbollah specialists. In the words of an Iraqi politician who was involved in sending students to these courses, “The people we sent developed their skills in Beirut and when they returned they started training activists inside Iraq.”¹⁶⁰ One of the groups to benefit from this Hezbollah training course was Kata’ib Hezbollah in Iraq, which now runs its own “online façade” group, Unit 10,000, which has developed its own “electronic armies capable of hacking, information operations and open source intelligence gathering.”¹⁶¹

Iran and Hezbollah work together in the disinformation space in several other ways, as well, including Iran’s creation of “the International Union of Virtual Media,” established to promote Iranian and Hezbollah propaganda while obscuring the source of such information.¹⁶² The U.S. Treasury Department sanctioned cyber threat actors backed by Iran’s MOIS,¹⁶³ and the Office of the Director of National Intelligence concluded that Iran engaged in a “multi-pronged covert influence campaign” targeting the 2020 U.S. presidential election while Hezbollah “took some steps to attempt to influence the election.”¹⁶⁴

VII. Hezbollah Management of Iran’s Regional Proxies

The central theme running through the steady increase in Hezbollah’s regional activism — be it in the form of fielding fighters to battlefields of strategic importance to Iran, training other Iranian proxies, collecting intelligence, engaging in illicit financial schemes, or promoting disinformation campaigns — is that it has been done at Iran’s behest. Hezbollah’s regional

“The central theme running through the steady increase in Hezbollah’s regional activism ... is that it has been done at Iran’s behest.”

escalation coincided with a period of time during which Iranian operatives began to play increasingly important decision-making roles for Hezbollah. As Lebanon analyst Hanin Ghaddar has noted, Hezbollah’s role as a regional actor did not start with its deployment to Syria, it was present in Iraq even earlier, “but it became more obvious and more structured in Syria — especially under IRGC [QF] commander Qassem Soleimani.” Over time, Ghaddar explains, Soleimani became the one leading Hezbollah deployments and activities across the region.¹⁶⁵ Indeed, it was because of his dual-hatted role as head of the IRGC-QF and director of Iran’s sub-state proxies that U.S. government lawyers concluded Soleimani was a legitimate target for a targeted assassination in January 2020. The extent of his personal leadership of these proxies became clear as U.S. analysts tracked his movements and mapped out his “pattern of life.”¹⁶⁶

The IRGC-QF began to take on this more pronounced day-to-day role directing Hezbollah operations after the 2008 assassination of Imad Mughniyeh, who held a unique position of confidence with Iranian leaders and IRGC-QF commanders. In fact, senior IRGC-QF and MOIS officials regularly visited Lebanon to work with Mughniyeh and assess the group’s security practices. IRGC officials were familiar with Mughniyeh since his teen years, and decision-makers in Iran were known to consult with him when determining regional policy.¹⁶⁷ As Mughniyeh’s relationship with the IRGC deepened, Hezbollah was able to achieve a measure of independence from Tehran and instead rely more heavily on his personal relationships. But Mughniyeh’s assassination put a halt to this trend. Hezbollah leaders promised to avenge his death, but the group’s plan, dubbed “Operation Radwan,” experienced a series of setbacks. Hezbollah not only lacked the resources and capability to carry out such operations abroad, it no longer had Mughniyeh to guide its operations. The failure of the group’s initial attempts to carry out vengeance for its terrorist chief forced Hezbollah closer to Iran as it suffered a series of thwarted attacks and failed to deliver the revenge it had promised.¹⁶⁸

Hezbollah divided up Mughniyeh’s responsibilities among several senior leaders, including his cousin and brother-in-law,

Mustafa Badreddine. But Badreddine never enjoyed the kind of relationship with the IRGC-QF that Mughniyeh had cultivated, and he even clashed with Soleimani over Hezbollah’s mission in Syria, fueling tensions between the two leaders.¹⁶⁹ In fact, media reports from just before Badreddine’s assassination in 2016 suggested that Iran was so displeased with its new Hezbollah counterpart that it wanted him removed from the battlefield.¹⁷⁰ Following Badreddine’s death, Hezbollah’s military operations became even more subservient to Tehran. While high-ranking Hezbollah commanders like Ibrahim Aqil, Fuad Shukr, and Talal Hamiyah went on to serve as Soleimani’s link to Hezbollah’s military apparatus, these men have never enjoyed the trust or sense of mutual respect once held by Mughniyeh.

As a result, the nature of the relationship between the IRGC-QF and Hezbollah shifted. In February 2012, Director of National Intelligence James Clapper characterized the relationship between Hezbollah and Iran as “a partnership arrangement, with the Iranians as the senior partner.”¹⁷¹ This “strategic partnership,” as National Counterterrorism Center Director Matthew Olsen put it, is the product of a long evolution from the 1980s, when Hezbollah was just a proxy of Iran. Together, Olsen added, these strategic partners pursue their shared “aims against Israel and the United States.”¹⁷²

Within this partnership, one of Hezbollah’s key roles was to serve as the managing partner for Iran’s proxy network. As Hezbollah dispatched expeditionary forces beyond Lebanon’s borders, its fighters typically commanded units including militants from other Shi’a groups. And through its training programs, Hezbollah established intimate working relationships with Shi’a militants across the region. Hezbollah managed these groups in close cooperation with Soleimani, who in the years before his death emerged from the shadows and became the public face of Iran’s “fighters without borders,” as some Iranians described Tehran’s regional proxy network.¹⁷³

In the wake of the Arab Spring, the fall of Saddam Hussein in Iraq, the Syrian civil war, and the rise of the Islamic State, Tehran



Photo above: Iranian men hold Iraqi Popular Mobilization Forces (C), Iran, Iraq, and Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) flags while taking part a rally to mark the Islamic Revolution anniversary in Azadi (Freedom) Square in western Tehran on February 11, 2020. [Photo by Morteza Nikoubazl/NurPhoto via Getty Images.](#)



The IRGC-QF officers stepping in to fill Soleimani’s shoes are all longtime Hezbollah partners.



tapped Soleimani to build up Iran’s regional proxy alliances. Soleimani built a devoted following among Iranian proxy groups, including both their leaders and foot soldiers. A hands-on commander, Soleimani established personal bonds with key militia commanders and mediated disputes over funding or prestige — until he was killed, alongside one of his key deputies, Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, in January 2020.

Soleimani’s force of personality and longtime connections made him uniquely qualified to oversee the management of Iran’s growing proxy network. But since no one commander could replace him, the IRGC-QF is drawing on a brain trust of several of its more senior and experienced managers to collectively fill Soleimani’s shoes. And as Iran’s “strategic partner,” Hezbollah leader Nasrallah and some of his key lieutenants are sure to play major roles. Indeed, the IRGC-QF officers stepping in to fill Soleimani’s shoes are all longtime Hezbollah partners.

“From Iran’s perspective, it has built an extensive network of proxy organizations — some more tightly connected to Iran than others — which follow the Hezbollah model.”

In August 2013, the U.S. Treasury Department sanctioned a group of Hezbollah operatives responsible for the group’s regional activities beyond Lebanon’s borders in places like Cyprus, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Turkey, Syria, and Yemen. At the time, the Treasury Department revealed that Mohammad Kawtharani had long served as “the individual in charge of Hizballah’s Iraq activities.”¹⁷⁴ Within weeks of Soleimani’s death, the State Department issued a reward for information about Kawtharani and other members of Hezbollah’s illicit financial networks, noting that he “has taken over some of the political coordination of Iran-aligned paramilitary groups formerly organized by Qassim Sulemani after Sulemani’s death in January. In this capacity, he facilitates the actions of groups operating outside the control of the Government of Iraq that have violently suppressed protests, attacked foreign diplomatic missions, and engaged in widespread organized criminal activity.” He also “assisted extremists transiting to Syria to support the Assad regime,” according to the State Department.¹⁷⁵ A senior Iraqi Shi’a leader noted that Kawtharani “was trusted by Soleimani, who used to depend and call on him to help him in crises and in meetings in Baghdad.”¹⁷⁶ Kawtharani’s “right-hand man” is another Hezbollah official, his brother Adnan Hussein Kawtharani, who was also designated by Treasury in 2018. Adnan also “attended meetings in Iraq with sectarian armed groups and Hizballah officials.”¹⁷⁷ Naturally, Kawtharani chaired urgent meetings of Iraqi militia leaders in Iraq after Soleimani’s death.¹⁷⁸

When the Treasury Department designated Adnan Kawtharani for his Hezbollah activities, it also listed Shibl Muhsin Ubayd al-Zaydi, a senior leader of the Kata’ib al-Imam Ali militia and an IRGC-QF operative. A close confidant of Soleimani’s, al-Zaydi worked closely with Hezbollah and IRGC-QF officers to establish financial support networks in Iraq for Iran’s proxy groups and fund Hezbollah’s participation in the Syrian civil war.¹⁷⁹

Consider also the man tapped to serve as the IRGC-QF deputy commander after Soleimani’s death, Gen. Muhammad Hussein-Zada Hejazi. As Iran’s regional strategy took on a decidedly more aggressive regional posture, Soleimani tapped Hejazi to command Department 2000, overseeing all IRGC-QF operations

in the Levant. In 2013, when Iran began shipping precision-guided missiles to Hezbollah through Syria, Hejazi oversaw the program.¹⁸⁰ Iran announced Hejazi’s sudden death under strange circumstances in April 2021.¹⁸¹

Similarly, as the IRGC-QF looked to increase its support to Houthi rebels on the ground in Yemen, it assigned IRGC-QF officials with established track records working with other elements of Iran’s proxy network, often in cooperation with Hezbollah. When Iran dispatched an official diplomatic envoy to the Houthis, the man they tapped for the job was Hasan Irlu, an IRGC-QF official who had years of experience overseeing weapons transfers and training for Houthi fighters as well as supporting IRGC-QF operations elsewhere on the Arabian Peninsula. Irlu was close to Soleimani, but he also provided training to Hezbollah operatives in Iran.¹⁸² In fact, on the day Soleimani was killed, one of his deputy commanders, Abdul Reza Shahlai, was also targeted in Yemen.¹⁸³ Shahlai survived, but the presence of an IRGC-QF deputy commander in Yemen with ties to previous attack plots in the United States, Iraq, and elsewhere was telling. No less important was Shahlai’s extensive experience training Shi’a militias tied to Iran in Iraq and helping to plan their attacks, typically in concert with Hezbollah. At one point, Shahlai served as the final approving authority for all Iran-based training that Hezbollah provided for members of JAM Special Groups. In 2006, he instructed a senior Hezbollah official to coordinate anti-aircraft rocket training for JAM Special Groups. Shahlai partnered with Hezbollah’s Ali Mousa Daquduq al-Musawi to plan the 2007 attack on U.S. forces at the Karbala Provincial Joint Coordination Center.¹⁸⁴

From Iran’s perspective, it has built an extensive network of proxy organizations — some more tightly connected to Iran than others — which follow the Hezbollah model. In the words of IRGC Gen. Mazaher Majidi, “There was a time when we used to boast that we had Hezbollah of Lebanon in the region. Today, we have dozens of cohesive forces that are ready to carry out military operations and are acting like Hezbollah: in Syria, in Iraq, in Yemen, in Afghanistan, and even in Pakistan.”¹⁸⁵

VIII. Conclusion: “We are not a party now, we’re international”

Hezbollah is a distinctly Lebanese actor, but its ideological alliance with Iran goes back to the group’s original founding and periodically dictates the prioritization of its sometimes-competing goals. Hezbollah’s current quandary revolves around the push and pull of two different sets of frequently competing priorities: first, serving as a regional militant player as part of what Iran sometimes calls its “fighters without borders” under the IRGC-QF; and second, its self-portrayal as a distinctly Lebanese party at a time when the crony-sectarian political system of which it is a key part has come under such tremendous pressure.¹⁸⁶ Hezbollah has long played a dominant role in Lebanon, extending its influence through political and social activism as well as terrorism, political violence, and military strength. But it has long insisted that it acts only with Lebanon’s best interests at heart. Today, with its extensive militant commitments across the region, Hezbollah can no longer maintain that fiction.

Speaking in 2015, a Hezbollah commander explained: “We shouldn’t be called Party of God. We’re not a party now, we’re international. We’re in Syria, we’re in Palestine, we’re in Iraq and we’re in Yemen. We are wherever the oppressed need us. ... Hezbollah is the school where every freedom-seeking man wants to learn.”¹⁸⁷ Today, Hezbollah acts as the managing partner for Iran’s network of militant proxies. And in the wake of Soleimani’s death, the group has taken on still more leadership responsibilities. Speaking after Soleimani’s death, it was Hezbollah leader Nasrallah who called on Iran’s proxies — the “Axis of Resistance,” as he called them — to step up operations to force the U.S. military out of the region.¹⁸⁸ Looking ahead, Iranian proxies may operate in an even more coordinated fashion, with Houthi rockets targeting southern Israel and foreign terrorist operations carried out by Shi’a militants of varying nationalities operating at Iran’s behest and Hezbollah’s direction.¹⁸⁹ To counter the growing regional threat posed by Iran’s proxy militant network, Western powers will have to work closely with regional allies to contain and disrupt the destabilizing activities of the IRGC-QF, Hezbollah, and other Shi’a militant groups active across the region.

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