

Hezbollah and Syria: From Regime Proxy to Regime Savior

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ABSTRACT *Hezbollah's longstanding ties with the House of Assad lie at the core of its domestic and regional policies. Losing Assad would undermine Hezbollah's regional strategic posture and embolden its domestic opponents to challenge its military status. Hezbollah is thus fighting in Syria to protect its status in Lebanon and its regional standing as much as to protect Iranian interests in the region. Public rhetoric from both Iran and Hezbollah leave little doubt about their unwavering commitment to the Assad regime. Will Iran and Hezbollah continue to fight for Assad's political survival irrespective of the consequences for regional stability? While they argue that political dialogue and negotiations are the only way forward in Syria, both Iran and Hezbollah have been circumspect about what a political solution in Syria should entail.*

On April 8, 2014, Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah, Hezbollah's Secretary-General, gave an extended interview to Assafir, a Lebanese daily. He was asked whether there are geographical limits or red lines to Hezbollah's presence in Syria, to which he answered: "We exist where we should exist." He specifically mentioned three areas in Syria where Hezbollah fighters are present in which, according to Nasrallah, they were obliged to enter – Al Qoseir, Qalamoun and Damascus – apart from what he refers to as "... Hizbullah's participation next to the Syrian troops." In an April 16th article in Al Monitor, Edward Dark, a pseudonym for a journalist based in

Syria, reveals the presence of about 250 Hezbollah fighters in the Zahra front in West Aleppo.

Hezbollah's Initial Reading of the Syrian Conflict Proved to be Mostly True

In late April 2011, two months after the start of the protests in Syria, when the uprising was still a civil, nonviolent movement, I had informal, off-the-record conversations with Hezbollah officials to hear their perspectives about the developments in Syria. I wrote about these conversations in a May 3 *Foreign Policy* post.

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My Hezbollah interlocutors argued at the time that regime change in Syria would not unfold easily or peacefully. They asserted that the Assad regime and its wide base of support would fight back and would use force to deal with the protests. There would be no negotiation between the regime and the protest movement. If Bashar Al Assad failed to rein in the protests quickly, the most likely scenario would be a protracted civil war that would engulf Syria, spill over into Lebanon—especially its northern

sad enjoyed a wide base of support, especially in major cities like Damascus and Aleppo. Moreover, Alawites and Christians would not abandon Assad. Both communities feared the consequences of a Sunni takeover to their physical and material well-being. My interlocutors noted that the critical factor in Egypt and Tunisia was the neutral role played by the army. In Syria, they expected the army to stand by the regime. When I asked about the possibility of an internal *coup d'état* led by an Alawite army official, they discounted such a scenario.

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Three years later, their assessment of the situation in Syria holds mostly true. Assad remains in power. Brute force, which led to the killing of more than 150,000 Syrians, has been the Assad regime's tool of choice. Despite the tens of thousands of military defectors, the top military brass and a large portion of the Syrian armed forces stuck with the regime. The majority of Alawites and Christians have not abandoned Assad. Violent spill-over from Syria is a reality with which Lebanon and Iraq are contending on a daily basis. Syria is engulfed in a protracted war that will likely last years.

part—and destabilize the region, including Turkey and Iraq. They argued that the millions of Alawites who reside in Turkey would not stand idly by if their fellow co-religionists in Syria were fighting for their survival. A protracted civil war in Syria would eventually lead to a breakup of Syria into a number of mini-states divided among the country's three major religious and ethnic groups: Alawites, Sunnis, and Kurds.

Despite this serious challenge to the Assad regime, they predicted that the Syrian president would stay put. Unlike Hosni Mubarak or Zein El Abidine Ben Ali, they argued that As-

In his April 8th Assafir interview, Nasrallah argued that the threat of partitioning Syria has now receded. As he put it, "I believe that we overcame the danger of partition. When we say that we overcame the threat of toppling the regime, we are also, more precisely, saying that we overcame the danger of dividing Syria." According to Nasrallah, the regime opponents can no longer topple the regime. At best,

“they can wage a war of attrition.” What Nasrallah failed to mention is that these dangers were mitigated mainly thanks to financial and military support from the regime’s allies, including Russia, Iran and Hezbollah.

Hezbollah’s Syria Narrative

Hezbollah’s involvement in the Syria war evolved as its assessment of the risks to the survival of the Assad regime changed. In the first months of the uprising, Hezbollah was advising the Syrian regime and army leadership, working with Iranian advisors operating in Syria, helping to train the regime paramilitary organization, and placing intelligence operations on the ground not only to assist the regime in infiltrating opposition ranks but also to conduct its own assessments of the conflict’s on-the-ground dynamics. Iran also relied on Hezbollah operatives to track evolving military developments in Syria.

The suicide bombing in July 2012 that killed Assad’s defense minister, brother-in-law, and head of his crisis team highlighted the increasing assertiveness of the rebels and their ability to infiltrate the regime’s inner sanctum. Hezbollah upped the ante on its military involvement in Syria shortly thereafter, and it quickly evolved into the military intervention that received most of the credit for helping the regime turn the conflict’s trajectory in its favor. Iran and Hezbollah’s objective was to prevent the military defeat of the Assad regime. It was left to Nasrallah to craft the pub-

lic narrative to rally public support for this foray into the Syrian civil war, especially among Lebanese Shia.

Hezbollah places a high premium on its constituency’s support mainly because the constituency provides the sole recruiting milieu for the party’s fighters. As such, Nasrallah and the leadership spent a long time crafting and marketing their Syrian narrative to Shia supporters and to their regional audience.

Nasrallah walked his constituency through a gradual shaping of the narrative. The narrative began with denial of involvement. Then, after news surfaced that one of Hezbollah’s key operatives had been killed in Al Qoseir, Nasrallah argued that Hezbollah men were fighting across the border of their own volition to protect their homes and the more than 20 Lebanese Shiite-majority villages in Syria that are close to the Lebanese border. The narrative subsequently shifted and started taking on a sectarian tone. Nasrallah argued that it was Hezbollah and the Shia’s duty to defend Shia shrines in Syria from the takfiris (extremists), especially Sayyeda Zainab’s shrine. By defending the shrines, he argued, Hezbollah was preventing a regional Sunni-Shiite civil war that would ensue if the shrine were demolished or violated, as had happened in Iraq following the 2006 attack on the Imam Askari mosque in Samarra.

On April 30, 2013, Nasrallah officially announced Hezbollah’s military foray into the Syrian quagmire. This announcement came months after



A man holding a placard featuring Lebanon's Shiite Muslim group, Hezbollah, Hassan Nasrallah, Syria's President Bashar al-Assad and his father and former president Hafez al-Assad.
EPA / Sana Handout

rumors and anecdotal evidence circulating in Shiite-majority Lebanese communities of Hezbollah cadres returning from Syria in body bags. Two principal themes framed Nasrallah's narrative: religious loyalty and personal security. Intervention in Syria was marketed in terms of three objectives: protecting Shiite-majority Lebanese villagers who lived on the Syrian side of the border; protecting Shiite shrines in Syria to prevent regional sectarian strife; and preventing Sunni extremist groups that were starting to establish a foothold in northern Syria from coming to Lebanon. According to Nasrallah in two speeches on May 25 and June 14, 2013, this was a preemptive and defensive war that was imposed on Hezbollah by a very

unique trifecta in the form of a "cosmic" conspiracy: the United States, Israel and the takfiris. This conspiracy would target Hezbollah next, and Hezbollah must defend itself. As he put it, "Only stupid people wouldn't do so". He went to great lengths arguing that the fight in Syria was not sectarian because takfiris were a threat to all Muslims, Sunnis and Shia alike. As he put it, "the dispute in Syria is between two sides, two axes, two projects, it is not between Sunnis and Shia, it is not between sects."

Hezbollah and Iran

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its domestic and regional policies. Losing Assad would undermine Hezbollah's regional strategic posture and embolden its domestic opponents to challenge its military status. Hezbollah is thus fighting in Syria to protect its status in Lebanon and its regional standing as much as to protect Irani-

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an interests in the region. Hezbollah did not engage in Syria solely because Iran's Supreme Leader ordered it to, as many analysts argue. The Iranian-Hezbollah relationship has long ceased to be a simple patron-client relationship in which Khamenei orders and Nasrallah executes. Rather, the relationship has become more multilayered and is based on shared ideological, religious and geopolitical interests. It is nurtured by personal links at the leadership level, and it operates according to a solid basis of mutual trust—trust that has been tested and fostered over the years and is underpinned by a deep sense of loyalty on the part of Hezbollah toward the Iranian leadership, particularly the Supreme Leader and his respect for Hezbollah's military achievements

vis-à-vis the Israel. Principal among the two entities' shared geopolitical interests is their joint commitment to undermining the "US project" and its policies in the Middle East. In this confrontation, Hezbollah views the Israelis and the Arab Gulf regimes as US proxies.

Assad's weakening hold on power has reinforced the indispensable role each party plays in this relationship. Hezbollah is now Iran's most trusted and reliable wingman in the Levant, and Iran is now Hezbollah's single strong and reliable ally.

Risks for Hezbollah

One of the most revealing phrases in Nasrallah's June 14 speech was, "We don't like at all this battle [in Syria], we don't like it. We like the other battle [with Israel]." Nasrallah did not say this to earn the goodwill of constituencies in Lebanon and the region. Rather, Nasrallah is aware that Hezbollah's involvement in Syria carries many risks and consequences, both domestically and regionally.

Indeed, as Nasrallah admitted in his *Assafir* interview, the Syrian intervention has been a double-edged sword for Hezbollah. On one hand, Hezbollah has gained new experiences in military theaters in which it had not engaged before. On the other hand, this intervention has damaged Hezbollah's credibility and respect that it commanded in Arab countries. However, Nasrallah was quick to say that such negative attitudes were only

held by Arab political elites and forces and that Arab popular opinion vis-à-vis Hezbollah's military role in Syria was rapidly moving in a more positive direction.

What Nasrallah failed to present in the interview are Hezbollah's plans for reaching out to a large segment of the Syrian people, particularly Sunnis who hold Hezbollah and their Shiite constituents responsible for the killing of their fathers and mothers, sons and daughters, and brothers and sisters. Hezbollah lacks a strategy about how to restore good relations between Syrians and Lebanese in the long term, especially as a large portion of Hezbollah's constituency resides across the border from these Sunni-majority communities.

The Lebanese Shiite Community and Hezbollah's Military Intervention

At the beginning of the Syrian uprising, an interesting debate took place in Hezbollah's ranks about what stance the party should take in regard to the Syrian uprising. My May 2011 post in *Foreign Policy* outlined some of the positions that were being debated. During that period, Hezbollah leaders pushed Assad to adopt serious reforms to meet the protesters' demands. As Nasrallah admitted in his *Assafir* interview, Hezbollah's reading of the Arab revolutions was that "...[w]hat took place had true popular roots, which surprised everybody. There were corrupt, weak, and frail regimes on the moral and

psychological levels. It was time that they collapsed according to the rules of history and human societies."

Hezbollah leaders urged Assad to sack his cousin, Atef Najeeb, who was behind the arrests, imprisonment and torture in Dar'aa of a group of 11-year old boys who had scrawled graffiti on a wall that called for the demise of the Syrian regime. For the protesters in Dar'aa and in other parts of Syria, Najeeb and his torture squad were the symbol of the regime's security apparatus that they could no longer tolerate. At the time, Hezbollah reached out to Syrian opposition figures, both inside and outside Syria, to help carve a middle ground between the regime and the opposition.

However, these early calls and activities aimed at promoting accommodation and launching a political dialogue between the Syrian warring parties were made at the same time that Hezbollah's military cadre was being sent to Syria to work with the Syrian army in an advisory and training role.

At the time, Lebanese Shia who were apprehensive about a deepening Hezbollah involvement in Syria voiced two arguments. First, they argued that Hezbollah was mixing its priorities. Protecting the home front, particularly its Shia constituency in Lebanon, should be its top priority. Getting involved militarily in Syria would detract Hezbollah's attention and resources away from this front. The second argument was driven by a pragmatism that is rooted in long-

held feelings of being a minority in a Sunni majority Arab region. Some Lebanese Shia argued that Syria would be a proxy war for a regional Sunni-Shia confrontation. One of these Shiite voices told me, “We Shia have no business poking the “Sunni” bear”. In a sectarian war pitting 10-15 percent Shia against 85-90 percent Sunni, the former stand to lose.

Today, the Shiite mood in Lebanon has shifted in favor of supporting Hezbollah’s military intervention. Two factors account for this shift: Hezbollah’s military successes in Al Qoseir, Yabroud and Qalamoun, and the violence waged by Jabhat Al Nusra and other extremist groups operating in Syria that target Shiite-majority communities in Lebanon. Statements made by leaders of the Syrian opposition against Hezbollah and Lebanon’s Shia add to this shift in support. Jabhat Al Nusra’s and others groups’ violence have reinforced Nasrallah’s argument that the “takfiris” in Syria are as much an existential threat to the Shia as are the Israelis.

To date, the Hezbollah leadership has refused to release an exact death toll in Syria. While the number of Hezbollah deaths has diminished in the last few months, mainly due to the different military theaters in which Hezbollah is currently engaged and which, according to Hezbollah insiders, do not involve direct combat as was the case before, it is estimated that Hezbollah’s loss has so far been in the high hundreds. For a party that invests substantive time and financial

resources in the training and formation of its fighters, and for a Shiite community that does not number in the millions and that to date has been the sole recruiting milieu for Hezbollah fighters, the impact of losing hundreds in the span of 12-18 months should not be taken lightly.

As the Syrian conflict enters a “war of attrition” stage that might last several years, Hezbollah officials must be pondering how long they can sustain such a war. Despite the new fighting

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experience Hezbollah is acquiring in Syria, it cannot afford to be dragged into a long attrition war, as it neither has the resources of a state nor the weapons and manpower of a regular army nor a united domestic front that supports its intervention.

Lebanese public opinion is divided between opposition and regime supporters, and as such there is a deep divide over the conflict in Syria and Hezbollah’s military intervention. While the fear of the takfiris may be sufficient to mobilize Shiite support behind Hezbollah for the foreseeable future, especially if more car bombs hit Lebanese Shiite majority areas, a prolonged war of attrition without a

clear-cut regime victory that continues to claim lives of young male Shiites will reignite debate inside Lebanon's Shiite community regarding what to do about Syria.

Hezbollah's Way Forward in Syria

Will Iran and Hezbollah continue to fight for Assad's political survival irrespective of the consequences for regional stability? Public rhetoric from both Iran and Hezbollah leave little doubt about their unwavering commitment to the Assad regime. However, in unofficial settings, Iranians are increasingly conveying a more nuanced picture of their interests in Syria. They speak of a flexible and pragmatic policy that is primarily concerned with the rising influence of extremist groups in the Syrian opposition, that is interested in the preservation of Syrian state institutions, and that is not wedded to Assad's political survival yet does not see in the short-to-medium term an alternative to Sunni extremist groups should Assad fall.

While they argue that political dialogue and negotiations are the only way forward in Syria, both Iran and Hezbollah have been circumspect about what a political solution in Syria should entail. In unofficial dialogues, Iranian analysts have suggested the following guidelines for a political solution in Syria: engaging all Syrian stakeholders in negotia-

tions about the future of the country leading to a new power-sharing arrangement that preserves the unity and territorial integrity of Syria and its people as well as the continuity of its state institutions, basing decisions on majority rule but with strong protection and guarantees for minorities, the Syrian army and the civil service, and ending any haven in Syria for terrorism, clearly defined.

In his *Assafir* interview, Nasrallah indicated that Hezbollah's strategy in Syria in the short-to-medium term is to limit losses and to "... reorganize the differences on the basis of agreed upon priorities and areas of disagreement between the parties." One priority to which Nasrallah referred is the fight against the "existential" takfiri threat in Syria, arguing that takfiri groups represent a regional danger. He did not speak of a final military solution in Syria or mention a unilateral regime victory. Instead, he called for identifying areas of shared interests on which Syrian and regional parties can collaborate, including fighting extremist groups and agreeing to disagree on such issues as the political transition in Syria and Assad's future. These issues should be tabled awaiting a regional settlement to the conflict in Syria.

Until international and regional conditions align in favor of such a settlement, Hezbollah men will continue to die in Syria to prevent a military defeat of the Assad regime. ■