

HEZBOLLAH'S ASCENT AND DESCENT

Hezbollah today is Lebanon's strongest political party. However, its military intervention in the Syrian conflict has put it at a crossroads. While the party's domestic strength continues, largely due to the weakness of its Lebanese political opponents and to its reliance on the possession of weapons to intimidate them, Hezbollah is facing increasing challenges in Syria. The author argues that as a deal on Iran's nuclear ambitions looms, and with it the possibility of imposed limitations on Iran's behavior by the international community, Hezbollah – being Iran's key client – will find its autonomy and ability to act in the domestic Lebanese sphere as well as externally reduced in the future.

Lina Khatib*



TURKISH POLICY
QUARTERLY

Spring 2015

* Dr. Lina Khatib is the Director of the Carnegie Middle East Center, Beirut, Lebanon.

Hezzbollah today is at a crossroads. On the one hand, the “Party of God” remains the strongest political party in Lebanon. On the other hand, its involvement in the Syrian conflict in support of the regime of Bashar al-Assad has come at a great material as well as political cost. The military engagement of Hezbollah in Syria has lost its popular support across the Arab world, shrinking its political footprint from a pan-Arab hero to a local actor in Lebanon. Despite its strength relative to its domestic political rivals, the trajectory of the Syrian conflict – with no clear victory on the horizon for the Assad regime and with the likely end of the conflict being through a compromise between external stakeholders including Saudi Arabia, the US, and Iran – means that Hezbollah’s future will bring sustainability but with reduced autonomy.

Hezbollah’s Ascent in Lebanon

Hezbollah’s rise to become Lebanon’s eminent political party has its roots in the withdrawal of Israeli troops from southern Lebanon in 2000 after almost two decades of occupation. Hezbollah capitalized on the withdrawal by using it as a pretext for holding on to its weapons in the name of national defense – making it the only Lebanese militia not to disarm after the end of the Civil War – especially that it was Hezbollah not the Lebanese Armed Forces that had succeeded in liberating the south. But although Hezbollah presented itself as the key driver behind Lebanon’s liberation, it still faced a serious political challenge in the form of former Prime Minister Rafik Hariri, who had embarked on an ambitious post-war reconstruction and political project in Lebanon. Hariri’s economic vision for Lebanon would have paved the way for future peace with Israel, while his political vision was for Lebanon to escape the shackles of Syrian oversight that – since the days of the civil war in the 1970s – had become the status quo in the country. Hezbollah had branded itself as the sole proprietor of “resistance” against Israel, and it had formed a strategic alliance with the Syrian regime. Therefore, the party as well as its Syrian ally put significant pressure on Hariri that culminated in his assassination in 2005, for which Hezbollah members were eventually indicted by the Special Tribunal for Lebanon (STL) set up by the United Nations to investigate the assassination.¹

The year after Hariri’s assassination, Hezbollah entered a war with Israel after kidnapping two Israeli soldiers on the Lebanese-Israeli border. But it managed to capitalize on the war to win hearts and minds not just all over Lebanon but also across the Arab world, as many came to regard it as the only Arab force able to stand up to Israeli aggression. With Hariri out of the picture, and with the sharp hike in its popularity after the 2006 war, Hezbollah escalated pre-emptive actions to protect

¹ Nicholas Blandford, *Killing Mr Lebanon: The Assassination of Rafik Hariri and its Impact on the Middle East* (London: IB Tauris, 2009).

itself from the looming Lebanese government endorsement of the STL. It declared the tribunal irrelevant, and withdrew its ministers from the cabinet in an attempt at halting its anticipated pro-STL vote. When the vote went ahead regardless, it staged an open-ended anti-government protest in downtown Beirut, calling for the replacement of the cabinet with a “national unity” government. The protest continued without a government change into 2008, when in May of that year the cabinet questioned the legality of Hezbollah’s private communication network, which ran parallel to the Lebanese state’s. This prompted Hezbollah to launch a military attack on western areas in Beirut known for being the stronghold of its key political rival – the Future Movement led by Hariri’s son Saad – in an attempt at intimidating the government to reconsider its position towards the communication network.

The events of May 2008 marked the first time Hezbollah’s weapons were used against other Lebanese (as opposed to just against Israel), and raised questions within the government about their legitimacy. This resulted in a political standoff between Hezbollah and its allies on one side and its Future Movement-led opponents on the other. Following Qatari mediation, the Doha Accords that ended the political standoff of May 2008 granted Hezbollah and its allies veto power within a newly formed national unity government, thereby protecting the party from any government decision that might have threatened Hezbollah’s possession and use of weapons.²

“Ten years after the assassination of Hariri, Hezbollah has succeeded in making its political rivals in Lebanon impotent.”

Following the start of the Syrian Uprising in 2011, which Hezbollah began to participate in through fighting alongside the Syrian regime, the Lebanese government increasingly questioned the legitimacy of Hezbollah’s weapons. This led Hezbollah to orchestrate the collapse of the cabinet through withdrawing all opposition ministers from it, thereby making the cabinet unconstitutional because it lacked Shiite representation. The government collapse resulted in a complete freeze of political processes in Lebanon because the cabinet was due to vote on a new parliamentary electoral law as well as to select a new president. A caretaker cabinet was appointed but the date of parliamentary elections passed without any agreement on the electoral law, leading the existing Parliament to extend its own mandate twice unconstitutionally. Hezbollah also never let the caretaker cabinet reach a quorum in any

² Lina Khatib, Dina Matar, and Atef Alshaer, *The Hizbullah Phenomenon: Politics and Communication* (London: Hurst, 2014).

meeting meant to select a new president, leaving Lebanon without a president to date. With this political vacuum, Hezbollah ensured that its actions within and outside Lebanon would remain officially unchallenged.

“Without [weapons], Hezbollah would find it impossible to continue to brand itself as the defender of Lebanon from Israel.”

Facing all this, Hezbollah’s political opponents led by the Future Movement have been increasingly weak. This is not only due to having suffered from a series of assassinations that targeted their key leaders from 2005 till 2013, but also due to their lack of unity and vision, in addition to being overly reliant on the US and Saudi Arabia as external patrons at a time when those powers had priorities

other than Lebanon on their foreign policy agendas.

Ten years after the assassination of Hariri, Hezbollah has succeeded in making its political rivals in Lebanon impotent. It is standing in the way of electing a parliament and a president because it does not want the matter of its weapons or its role in Syria to be questioned by the government.³ Hezbollah’s weapons are an existential issue. Without them, Hezbollah would find it impossible to continue to brand itself as the defender of Lebanon from Israel. But, as the events of May 2008 demonstrated, they are also the tool through which Hezbollah exerts pressure on its political rivals domestically.

Hezbollah’s Descent in Syria

Hezbollah’s weapons are the main motivation behind its involvement in the Syrian conflict. Syria is where Hezbollah’s weapons pass through from Iran, and where Hezbollah stores some of those weapons, as well as being the place where it trains its troops. The Syrian uprising threatened to topple the Assad regime, which, for Hezbollah, would have carried the risk of losing this important lifeline. Iran therefore summoned Hezbollah to help the Assad regime in an attempt at crushing the Syrian opposition. In the beginning, both Hezbollah and Iran believed that they would be able to easily overwhelm the opposition on the basis of Iran’s own experience in crushing the Green Movement in 2009. But the involvement of regional actors like Saudi Arabia and Qatar in aid of the opposition, as well as myriad private donors who funded the creation of different jihadist groups to fight the regime, meant that the Syrian uprising evolved into a severe military confrontation

³ Mario Abou Zeid, “Hezbollah’s Last-Ditch Battle,” *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, 2 April 2014, <http://carnegie-mec.org/2014/04/02/hezbollah-s-last-ditch-battle/h6sc>

that dragged Iran and Hezbollah deeper into the conflict as Assad proved unable to counter all those opponents single-handedly. Hezbollah's engagement quickly escalated from sending military advisers to help the Syrian army to deploying elite troops and significant numbers to fight on the frontlines.⁴

The underestimation of the resilience of the opposition has been a great blow for the Assad regime, as the Syrian army has been unable to stand up to the Free Syrian Army as well as the hundreds of jihadist groups fighting against it. Assad was pushed to rely on Russia, Iran, and Hezbollah to prop up his regime. This has transformed Assad from a strategic ally of Hezbollah and Iran's to a client, thereby giving Hezbollah the upper hand in its relationship with Syria and translating into domestic political strength for the party in Lebanon. In the past, no president could be elected in Lebanon without Syrian blessing. Today, the country remains without a president because of Hezbollah's decision, not Assad's. Hezbollah's weapons therefore once more became a political tool. While in May 2008, they were used domestically to dictate Lebanese politics, today they are being used externally but achieving the same result.

“Part of Hezbollah’s strategy throughout its existence has been to both co-opt as well as intimidate its constituents.”

However, the hike in Hezbollah's political power vis-à-vis Assad as well as its rivals in Lebanon has come at a great cost. Until 2011, Hezbollah had branded itself as the champion of the downtrodden in the fight against injustice. Since then, its support of a regime that is mass slaughtering its own people has caused it to lose the wide embrace it had enjoyed in the Arab world, particularly as most Arabs welcomed the uprisings of 2011. Hezbollah has also been seen as a Shiite force killing Sunnis in Syria, which has reversed the support it used to have within the Sunni-majority Arab world. Although Hezbollah tried for a while to avoid using sectarian rhetoric to frame its involvement in Syria, it eventually did invoke sectarian language (for example in some of the speeches of its leader Hassan Nasrallah).⁵ This only added to the sense of popular resentment against Hezbollah among Arab Sunnis.

Hezbollah's intervention in Syria also triggered a series of counterattacks by Sunni jihadist groups, who conducted a number of explosions in Hezbollah strongholds inside Lebanon in 2013 and early 2014. The attacks weakened Hezbollah's image as an impenetrable bastion of defense and resistance, but more crucially, they contributed

⁴ Interview by the author with an international official, April 2015.

⁵ See for example: Nasrallah's speech on 2 August 2013.

to increasing sectarian tensions in Lebanon. This was not because Lebanese Sunnis sympathized with Sunni jihadists – Lebanon’s Sunnis are mostly moderate – but because they regarded Hezbollah’s involvement in Syria as the reason behind the spillover of the Syrian conflict into Lebanon.

“As long as Iran continues to see value in supporting the Assad regime militarily, Hezbollah will remain on the ground in Syria.”

Hezbollah tried to use the attacks to its advantage by framing its involvement in Syria as being about protecting Lebanon from the threat of “takfiri jihadists,” but Hezbollah’s opponents did not find the argument convincing and public disagreements on the issue between pro- and anti-Hezbollah politicians and media outlets began to risk enflaming sectarian tensions.⁶ As the terrorist at-

tacks continued, Lebanon’s politicians from across the political spectrum became concerned about deteriorating stability in the country. They proceeded to cooperate with Hezbollah on security to try to shield Lebanon from the activities of jihadists because they worried that their continuation and its sectarian repercussions would eventually drag the country into a new civil war. This pragmatic cooperation succeeded in largely halting the attacks, but it did not pave the way for thawing the political standoff between Hezbollah and its rivals.

Hezbollah has also incurred significant material losses in Syria. Because of the Syrian regime’s inability to cope with its various military challenges, the party had to increase its level of involvement, sending more troops to fight in Syria, including elite troops as well as young fighters. Hezbollah normally regards using young fighters in battles as a positive development because it gives those fighters valuable experience. However, this only works when involvement is on a limited scale. In Syria, Hezbollah has incurred losses in lives estimated to be in the thousands, with a quarter being from Hezbollah’s elite troops (the party itself has only admitted to losing few hundred men in Syria, but on the ground reports from other sources estimate the figure to be much higher. No official confirmed figures exist as Hezbollah is careful not to disseminate sensitive information about its military wing).⁷ This has led it to rely on young fighters out of necessity not strategy, and has weakened its military capacity.

Those losses have caused a degree of unease within the Shiite community in Lebanon, which has already paid a high price during Hezbollah’s confrontation with

⁶ Khatib, Matar, and Alshaer (2014).

⁷ Interview by the author with an international official, April 2015.

Israel in 2006. Unease will not lead to public dissent, however. Part of Hezbollah's strategy throughout its existence has been to both co-opt as well as intimidate its constituents, and it has managed to silence those who had tried to establish other political parties from within the Shiite community, and to dominate the other existing Shiite political party in Lebanon, Amal, leaving Hezbollah to become the de facto self-designated voice of Lebanese Shiites.⁸ But Hezbollah is feeling trapped as a result of the Syrian conflict, and cannot end its involvement without direction from the Supreme Leader in Iran, because according to the *wilayat al-faqih* (Guardianship of the Jurist) system that Hezbollah is part of, all decisions of engagement in war can only be taken by the *wali al-faqih*. As long as Iran continues to see value in supporting the Assad regime militarily, Hezbollah will remain on the ground in Syria.

Hezbollah After the Syrian Conflict

Hezbollah cannot withdraw from Syria until a solution to the Syrian conflict is found that is acceptable to Iran. This solution is likely to be a political compromise blessed by external stakeholders (Saudi Arabia, US, Russia) and that results in the formation of a new government system that retains Iran's interests. As Hezbollah's weapons are the backbone of its political power, Iran will not accept a resolution to the Syrian conflict that would threaten this lifeline. This means that Hezbollah's status as the strongest political actor in Lebanon will be sustained. But at the same time, as an agreement on Iran's nuclear development program looms, Iran's expected embrace by the international community will come at the cost of losing its free reign in the Middle East: the more Iran is engaged by the international community, the more accountable it needs to be for its internal and external actions. For Hezbollah, this means a new limitation on its ability to act domestically as well as abroad. As such, Hezbollah's future after the Syrian conflict ends carries much more modest prospects. For the first time in its history, it will be forced to take into consideration the impact of its behavior on Iran's international standing, because if Hezbollah's weapons are a red line for Iran, Iran's well-being is also a red line for Hezbollah.

⁸ Khatib, Matar, and Alshaer (2014).