

Hezbollah's Growing Threat Against U.S. National Security Interests in the Middle East

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Chairman Ros-Lehtinen, Ranking Member Deutch, members of this distinguished subcommittee, and subcommittee staff, thank you for the opportunity to testify today.

Founded over thirty years ago, the Lebanese Hizballah is one of the most powerful and dangerous rebel and terrorist groups in the world. Hizballah, however, is in a time of transition. The Syrian civil war in particular has transformed the group, undermining its position in Lebanon, altering its focus in the region, and tarnishing its image in the Middle East. The group remains a threat to the United States and particularly to Israel, but the tentative deterrence Israel has established is likely to hold, though many factors could upset this uneasy peace. For now, Hizballah has even less interest in a direct clash with the United States. However, the group's close relationship with Iran and ideological opposition to a U.S. role in the Middle East are both factors that could lead to problems in the future. In addition, Hizballah supports an array of local actors in Iraq, Syria, and the Palestinian territories that are or could be opposed to U.S. interests in the Middle East.

My testimony today will detail how and why Hizballah has transformed in recent years with particular attention to the Syrian civil war. It then describes Iranian support for the group in general and in the aftermath of the U.S.-Iran nuclear agreement. My statement then examines Hizballah's declining regional image and assesses the threat to Israel and the United States. My statement concludes by offering several implications for U.S. policy.

Hizballah in Transition

Since the group was founded in the early 1980s, the Lebanese Hizballah has survived, and often triumphed over, numerous challenges to its authority and very existence. Israel has assassinated several of Hizballah's leaders and fought wars of varying intensity against the group since its founding. Hizballah has also faced down numerous challenges in Lebanon, emerging as the strongest political and military organization in the country – including the Lebanese Armed Forces. The Lebanese army currently is not strong enough to crack down on the group, and should it do so, it would further split this already-divided country.

Hizballah has moved away from a number of its historic objectives. Some of this change is due to a maturing of the group and a diminishment of its ideological fervor, but the group's victories have also altered it. With its devastating 1983 bombings of the U.S. embassy in Beirut and the Marine barracks, it succeeded in expelling U.S. troops from Lebanon. Hizballah forces fought Israeli troops in Lebanon and, in 2000, expelled them from the country. Hizballah's original fervor to create an Iranian-style theocracy in Lebanon has dimmed, and it has accepted the reality that it will not bring an Islamic revolution to Lebanon. However, the organization remains bitterly anti-Israel and anti-American.

Hizballah is a terrorist group, but terrorism is only a small part of what the organization does. It is a political party, a social welfare agency, a quasi-state military, and even a part of the Lebanese government. Conceptualizing it only as a terrorist group misses most of its functions and obscures the reason it is so popular among many Lebanese Shi'ites. Unlike many terrorist groups, Hizballah cares about the welfare of its constituents and has deep ties to the Lebanese Shi'ite community. Its hospitals, schools, and social welfare organizations serve Lebanese Shi'ites and at times other communities. However, Hizballah's various functions are interrelated: Hizballah's social welfare organizations feed recruits to its military, and it uses its political power in Lebanon to shield itself from international pressure to disarm. Indeed, Hizballah and its allies' political position gives it veto power over government policy: a power they have used to remove a Prime Minister whom they did not believe was protecting the group's interests. The group's political and military leadership is unified and should be considered part of one cohesive organization: European attempts to ban Hizballah's "military" wing but not its "political" wing misconstrue the nature of the group.

The organization's post-2011 involvement in the Syria civil war has been transformative. Historically the organization presented itself as an Islamist (not Shi'ite) movement dedicated to fighting the West in general and Israel in particular. This image always fell short of reality, but many Lebanese and Arabs in general admired the group for its anti-Israel efforts and services to non-Shi'ites in Lebanon. It seemed to live up to its rhetoric of transcending sectarianism.

Hizballah joined the fray in Syria because the Assad regime has long been a key supporter for its operations in Lebanon and against Israel, as well as a useful transit route for weapons. Even more important, Hizballah's closest ally, Iran was calling in all its favors and saw the potential fall of its ally in Damascus as a calamity. By taking sides in

a brutal sectarian war, Hizballah has deepened its Shi'ite identity at the cost of its broader Islamist one and become the sectarian actor it always claimed to transcend.

The organization's position in Lebanon has changed as well. Even before the Syrian civil war, Hizballah angered many Lebanese when it stayed close to Syria after the United States, France, and other powers coerced Syrian forces into leaving Lebanon in 2005. Its firm support for Syria angered many Lebanese Christians and Sunni Muslims opposed to Damascus and in favor of a more independent Lebanon: the pro- and anti-Syrian position became the largest political fault line in Lebanon. Relations with other groups in Lebanon worsened further when, in 2008, Hizballah seized parts of West Beirut after the government tried to wrest control of the group's telecommunication infrastructure. The revelations from the United Nations investigation that Hizballah was probably behind the 2005 assassination of the anti-Syrian Prime Minister Rafik Hariri further worsened relations.¹

The Syrian civil war that broke out in 2011 took this tension to a new level.² Hizballah initially hid its involvement in the war, fearing the further rupturing of ties to anti-Syrian factions in Lebanon. However, the casualty toll became impossible to hide, and in May 2013 its leaders openly embraced its role. Hizballah forces have been involved in several important battles against opposition forces, and they have proven a vital ally for the Syrian regime: their skill and discipline are often far greater than those of Syrian military forces. Hizballah regularly maintains a presence of perhaps 5,000 fighters in Syria, rotating units in and out to maintain overall readiness. Because of the large number of forces it has deployed in Syria, Hizballah has expanded the overall size of its military wing: one analysis puts their number at roughly 20,000 trained fighters, with 5,000 having had advanced training in Iran.³

Although Hizballah was cautious about entering the fray, many Lebanese Shi'ites now see it as a defender of their community. They look at the atrocities the Islamic State perpetrates against Shi'ites and other minorities in Syria and Iraq and believe that a strong Hizballah is necessary to protect their community. Occasional anti-Shi'ite violence in Lebanon, rather than intimidate Hizballah, increases support for the group among its core supporters. On the other hand, many Lebanese Sunnis, seeing the Assad regime slaughter their co-religionists on a mass scale next door, now reject a group they once admired for its anti-Israel stance, provision of social services, and relative (by Lebanese standards) lack of corruption. Lebanese Christians and some members of the Sunni middle class are somewhere in the middle, abhorring the Islamic State but still skeptical of Hizballah.

Extreme voices within the Lebanese Sunni community, including jihadists tied to the Islamic State or to Jabhat al-Nusra, Al Qaeda's affiliate in Syria, see Hizballah as a leading or even top foe and have conducted terrorist attacks in Lebanon against the group and its supporters. In 2014, groups probably linked to Jabhat al-Nusra have carried out attacks on Iranian facilities in Lebanon, and in November 2015, Islamic State supporters

¹ Ronen Bergman, "The Hezbollah Connection," *New York Times Magazine*, February 10, 2015, <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/02/15/magazine/the-hezbollah-connection.html>

² This section draws on my work with Bilal Saab. See Daniel Byman and Bilal Saab, "Hizballah in a Time

² This section draws on my work with Bilal Saab. See Daniel Byman and Bilal Saab, "Hizballah in a Time of Transition," Center for Middle East Policy and Brookings (November 2014,)

<http://www.brookings.edu/research/papers/2014/11/hezbollah-in-time-of-transition-byman-saab>

³ "Hizballah," *Jane's World Insurgency and Terrorism*, IHS.com, May 8, 2015, p. 15.

carried out two suicide bombings in a Hizballah neighborhood in Beirut, killing over 40 people – the worst single bombing Lebanon has suffered since the end of the Lebanese civil war in 1991. Three Lebanese-Americans died in the attack.⁴

Continued Iranian Support

Iranian support has long been vital to Hizballah's survival and success.⁵ Indeed, Hizballah entered Syria despite the risks to its reputation and personnel in part to assist its Iranian patron. Hizballah looks to Iran's Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, for ideological and strategic direction, and other Iranian officials, including those from the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, regularly offer guidance to the group. Beyond strategic direction, Iran has provided Hizballah with virtually every form of assistance, ranging from arms – including Hizballah's massive rocket and missile arsenal – and money to training and organizational advice. Due to Iranian financing and direct transfers from Iran and Syria, Hizballah's arsenal includes unmanned aerial vehicles, Scud missiles, anti-ship cruise missiles, man-portable air defense systems, anti-tank guided missiles, and other advanced equipment.⁶ Financial support is usually said to range between \$60 million and \$200 million a year, though what counts as support is often not defined and this figure varies depending on the contingencies Hizballah faces. Hizballah has used this money to pay its troops and develop a high-quality social service network. Thousands of Hizballah fighters have also trained in Iran itself. In addition, the foreign networks of Hizballah and those of Iranian intelligence are interwoven, with joint operations being common.⁷

Hizballah leaders have long portrayed themselves as foot soldiers in an Iranian army. Although the group has its own interests that are not linked to Iran's foreign policy – and Iran often respects these differences – the commitment to Tehran's interests is deep and genuine. Tehran, for its part, has a strong and deep commitment to Hizballah and its success in Lebanon. Iran sees the Lebanese group as one of its rare victories in spreading its revolution. In addition, the group offers Iran a way to strike Israel directly. Hizballah also serves as Iran's proxy and ally in the region in general, augmenting its power in Syria and of course Lebanon. The tight coordination of Hizballah and Iranian forces in the Syria fighting has made the already close relationship even closer.

This close relationship is not likely to change with the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action between the United States and Tehran over the Iranian nuclear program. It is possible that Iran may even step up support for Hizballah, taking advantage of its improved economic position after sanctions relief. With the decline in Iran's relationship with Hamas and the collapse of the Syrian state, Hizballah is one of the few bright spots for Iran in the Arab world, and Tehran wants to keep the group strong. At the same time, Iran is diplomatically overstretched, deploying considerable forces within Syria to prop

⁴ “3 Dearborn Victims of Lebanon Terror Attack Mourned,” November 14, 2015, <http://www.detroitnews.com/story/news/local/wayne-county/2015/11/13/dearborn-killed-lebanon-attacks/75716698/>

⁵ For my thoughts on this issue, see Daniel Byman, *Deadly Connections: States that Sponsor Terrorism* (Cambridge University Press, 2015).

⁶ See “Hizballah,” *Jane's World Insurgency and Terrorism*.

⁷ For an excellent discussion, see Matthew Levitt, *Hezbollah: The Global Footprint of Iran's Party of God* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2015).

up Assad, maintaining a large clandestine presence in Iraq, and even establishing limited ties to the Houthis in Yemen. At home, the collapse of oil prices – and decades of economic mismanagement– has coupled with an increase in popular expectations of economic prosperity among ordinary Iranians. So although sanctions relief puts more money into Iran’s coffers, Iran has many demands on these scarce funds, and in my judgment the level of support for Hizballah is not likely to change significantly barring a significant change in the regional situation.

Changing Regional Perceptions of Hizballah

Perhaps the biggest negative consequence for Hizballah in the Syrian civil war is the collapse of its regional reputation and associated prestige in the Arab and broader Muslim world. Hizballah is the only Arab military to defeat Israel by force of arms, which it did when its war of attrition pushed Israel out of Lebanon in 2000. After its 2006 war with Israel, when Hizballah launched perhaps 4,000 rockets and missiles at Israel and fought the Israeli Defense Forces to a draw, opinion polls showed Hizballah’s leader, Hassan Nasrallah, as the most popular man in the Arab world. The sectarian nature of the Syrian civil war, however, puts Hizballah firmly on the side of an unpopular minority in the Arab world. Today Nasrallah and Hizballah are regularly vilified, with conservative Sunnis labeling the group the “party of Satan,” a twist on the group’s name “the party of God.”

The March 2016 designation of Hizballah as a terrorist group by the Arab League and Gulf Cooperation Council is a reflection of this shift in attitude. Ironically, Hizballah’s use of terrorism as a tactic was much more pronounced in the 1980s, when its suicide bombing of U.S. and French peacekeepers and hostage taking of Westerners in Lebanon was at its peak. Hizballah at the time also worked with Iran to strike targets in the Gulf states because of those regimes’ support for Iraq in the Iran-Iraq war. Since then, the organization has consistently been involved in terrorism, often in conjunction with Iran. The League’s designation is thus not a reflection of a sudden change in the organization’s methods – if anything, the group uses less terrorism if we define the term narrowly to exclude attacks outside war zones and only against civilian targets – but rather a belated attempt by U.S. allies in the Gulf and elsewhere to delegitimize the group and its Iranian backer.

The Threat to Israel

Hizballah remains committed to Israel’s destruction, but this goal is less of a priority than in past years. From its inception, Hizballah defined itself as the tip of the spear against Israel, and its forces became progressively more skilled and able to conduct an array of sophisticated military operations against the Jewish state. Its casualty ratio against Israel steadily improved, and Israeli military officers regularly describe the group as formidable. In the 2006 war with Israel, Hizballah killed more than 160 Israelis, a huge figure for the small and casualty-sensitive Jewish state. Hizballah training camps use models of Israeli streets, and the organization’s rocket arsenal and tunnel complexes in Lebanon are designed with Israel specifically in mind. All of Israel is in range of

Hizballah's long-range rockets, though Israel's missile defense system offers Israelis some comfort should conflict resume.

Hizballah, often in cooperation with Iran, has conducted an array of terrorist attacks against Israel around the world, including attacks in 1992 and 1994 in Argentina that together killed over 100 people. Hizballah also tried to assassinate Israelis traveling outside their country in Europe and Asia. In 2012, Hizballah was linked to a bus bombing in Bulgaria that killed five Israeli tourists and their Bulgarian driver. Hizballah and Iran often see these attacks as revenge for what they consider to be Israeli aggression, such as the killing of Hizballah leaders or attacks on Iranian nuclear scientists.

In addition to these direct attacks, Hizballah has acted as a quasi-state sponsor of terrorism. Hizballah remains vehement in its calls for Israel's destruction and support for the Palestinian cause. It has supported an array of Palestinian militant groups with training and arms, encouraging them to use violence against Israel. However, several Palestinian groups, notably Hamas, oppose Hizballah's position in Syria and have distanced themselves from the group and its Iranian patron. Shared interests, and the relatively few allies that Hamas and Hizballah possess, however, are likely to ensure that relations are maintained and perhaps even improved should the sectarian fervor in the region die down.

Since 2006 – and in reality well before that – Hizballah has been deterred from a massive attack on Israel. Hizballah fears a fierce Israeli response that would destroy its military infrastructure and devastate the lives and livelihoods of its Lebanese constituents. Because of this fear, Hizballah has looked for ways to continue the conflict with Israel on the margins, keeping the struggle alive but trying to limit the violence to prevent tough Israeli retaliation. Israel, for its part, has been content with a shadow war, where at times it kills a Hizballah commander or destroys a weapons shipment but avoids more aggressive, potentially escalatory actions.⁸

Since 2006, the border has been surprisingly quiet, suggesting the strength of Israel's current deterrence. In addition, the presence of UN peacekeepers deployed after the 2006 war makes it difficult for Hizballah to have the large-scale presence it had in the border area before the war, though it still has cadre there who are not in uniform. Hizballah has built bunkers, underground rocket platforms, and other sites farther away from the border, near the Litani River. Israel has also shot Hizballah fighters in Syria when they attempted to plant a bomb near a border fence along the Golan Heights.⁹

Hizballah's involvement in the Syrian civil war has made it even more cautious about taking on Israel. Hizballah's large-scale deployments in Syria, and the associated casualties – close to 1,000 – are draining the organization.¹⁰ Hizballah has had to expand recruitment and accept younger fighters. Israeli security officials are rightly concerned that Hizballah fighters have gained valuable combat experience. However, they are primarily doing counterinsurgency operations and would face difficulty adjusting to the

⁸ See Daniel Byman, *A High Price: The Triumphs and Failures of Israeli Counterterrorism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).

⁹ "Hizballah," *Jane's World Insurgency and Terrorism*, pp. 7 and 41.

¹⁰ Ali Alfoneh, "Hezbollah Fatalities in the Syrian War," Washington Institute for Near East Policy, February 22, 2016, <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/hezbollah-fatalities-in-the-syrian-war>

high-intensity and overwhelming firepower the Israeli military would bring to any battle. Perhaps most importantly, the organization's Lebanese constituents have little appetite for more conflict.

This caution could change for several reasons. Setbacks in Lebanon or elsewhere would give the group an incentive to restore its past reputation, and fighting Israel is one potentially popular way of doing so. Israel also regularly attacks Hizballah targets in Syria and Lebanon, primarily to stop the transfer of advanced weapons from the Syrian arsenal. These strikes have at times killed senior Hizballah leaders and even a senior Iranian official. Hizballah has not escalated after such attacks, but this restraint is by no means guaranteed. Finally, should the U.S.-Iran nuclear deal collapse and the United States attack the Iranian nuclear infrastructure, Hizballah might attack Israel as part of the Iranian response. Similarly, if U.S.-Iran tension increases for other reasons, we should expect Hizballah to stand by its Iranian ally, and one way of doing so might be to try to drag Israel into a conflict and thus attempt to delegitimize any U.S. response.

Hizballah's has been cautious about a direct confrontation with the United States since the U.S. withdrawal from Lebanon, but it has remained hostile and supportive of anti-U.S. forces in the Middle East. It has assisted Iranian anti-U.S. operations, notably the 1996 Khobar Towers attack that killed 19 U.S. servicemen.¹¹ When U.S. forces were fighting against Shi'ite militias in Iraq after the 2003 invasion, Hizballah often aided these militias with training and other forms of support. It has also worked with Iran to case U.S. targets around the world and otherwise maintains considerable potential to conduct terrorist attacks should its calculations change. This might occur should there be a U.S.-Iran military confrontation or if the United States decides to try to remove the Assad regime.

Implications for the United States

In Lebanon and Syria, the United States faces a dilemma. Washington correctly does not want Hizballah's regional or national influence to grow. However, Hizballah is one of the most formidable foes of the Islamic State at a time when the United States is both trying to fight the group in Syria and stop the violence from spreading to Lebanon. Hizballah is also reportedly assisting various Shi'ite forces in Iraq against the Islamic State.

A standard recommendation – one I have endorsed in the past and still favor to some degree – is to build up the Lebanese Armed Forces and otherwise strengthen the Lebanese state. Helping the Lebanese state become militarily stronger and better able to provide services would undermine some support for Hizballah and enable the government to resist Hizballah's threats of force that ensure the group's independence. For the most part U.S. efforts to do so have failed, in part due to general problems with U.S. training programs but especially because Lebanese leaders do not want to exacerbate tensions within Lebanon through open hostility toward Hizballah. Part of this is due to

¹¹ Adam Goldman, "Hezbollah Operative Indicted in United States for Attack on Khobar Towers," *Washington Post*, August 26, 2015, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/hezbollah-operative-indicted-in-us-for-attack-on-khobar-towers-captured/2015/08/26/6f84ad08-4c00-11e5-902f-39e9219e574b_story.html

fear, but part is also a concern that Lebanon's precarious stability could collapse should Lebanese elites further divide the country as waves of unrest emanate from Syria.

The Saudi decision to pull \$4 billion in support from Lebanon (most of which was to go to its armed forces), freeze funding of suspected Hizballah bank accounts in the Kingdom, and discourage Saudis from using Lebanon as a tourist destination further consolidates Hizballah's position. Riyadh, facing significant budget shortfalls due to the decline in the price of oil, is waging an expensive effort of its own in Yemen. Saudi Arabia's deficit in 2015 was almost \$100 billion, and the Yemeni war is costing it at least \$1 billion per month (the true figure is probably much more).¹² Hizballah has roundly criticized the Saudi war in Yemen as well as Riyadh's execution of the dissident Shi'ite cleric Nimr al-Nimr. The refusal of the Lebanese government to openly side with Saudi Arabia against Iran in Syria and Yemen or to condemn the January 2016 attack on the Saudi embassy in Tehran – in large part because Lebanese leaders did not want to anger Hizballah – has led Riyadh to question whether its money was buying friendship. Saudi support had enabled anti-Hizballah figures to maintain some degree of power and patronage with the military and Lebanese society in general, and its diminishment offers Hizballah a relative advantage. The United States should encourage Riyadh to resume its support for non-Hizballah individuals and institutions in Lebanon.

The million plus Syrian refugees in Lebanon are a potential destabilizing force that could lead to more violence in the fragile country. The refugees might take part in the fighting in Syria, with Lebanon serving as a base and a haven. It is also possible that the refugees might incite violence in Lebanon, fostering a civil war, as the Palestinians did before them. To prevent this, more U.S. and international aid for refugees in Lebanon is vital. The United States should also assist Lebanon in securing its borders and otherwise trying to prevent the Syrian conflict from spilling over into the country.

Finally, the United States should work with Israel to ensure its deterrence of Hizballah and that its limited uses of force in Syria and elsewhere do not escalate into a broader confrontation. Should the U.S. step up its role in Syria and Iraq, and thus interact indirectly with Hizballah-linked forces, tight coordination with Israel becomes especially important.

¹² Mohamad Bazzi, "Why the Oil Collapse Is Forcing Saudi Arabia to Cut Back on Its Checkbook Diplomacy," *Reuters*, March 16, 2016, <http://blogs.reuters.com/great-debate/2016/03/16/why-oil-collapse-is-forcing-saudi-arabia-to-cut-back-on-its-checkbook-diplomacy/>