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As unimaginable as the dismemberment of Syria has been a result of the most destructive episode of civil conflict in the twenty-first century, perhaps equally unforeseen is the transition of Hezbollah following its open-ended intervention in this war from a local actor with significant political power and military capabilities into a formidable regional force, fully integrated into an axis comprising Iran, Russia, and the Syrian regime.

Much has been written about the effects of the Syrian conflict on Hezbollah, and while there is little to quarrel with the conclusion, shared by many, that the war has marked a new, turbulent era in Hezbollah's history, or perhaps a turning point, the reality is that the group has been facing an identity crisis

for more than sixteen years, when Israel decided to pull out all its troops from southern Lebanon, handing Hezbollah a unique victory in the annals of Arab-Israeli military history. Since then, however, with the exception of the 2006 war with Israel, Hezbollah has seemed disoriented, looking like, as the International Crisis Group aptly put it in 2003, a "rebel without a cause."¹

What does Hezbollah want? There are no easy answers to this question because Hezbollah is a Janus-faced organization, seeking different things that are not always compatible. It is possible that, not unlike most other

1 International Crisis Group, "Hezbollah: Rebel Without a Cause?" Briefing No. 7, July 30, 2003 <https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/eastern-mediterranean/lebanon/hezbollah-rebel-without-cause>

political actors, survival, and an adequate measure of political relevance and security for itself and its own Shi'ite support-base, are what Hezbollah desires.

However, if this were the case and self-preservation were the ultimate cause, how the group has gone about pursuing this presumed aspiration for the past decade and a half raises more questions than it answers. If this minimalistic assumption is correct, then one might ask why Hezbollah refused to fold its powerful military wing into the Lebanese army when it could have done so at any point after the liberation in 2000 in exchange for credible security and political guarantees? Instead, Hezbollah has vowed to continue the armed struggle against Israel despite the IDF's withdrawal from Lebanon's southern region, except for a small strip of disputed land at the intersection of

the Lebanese-Syrian border and the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights. Furthermore, Hezbollah has shown no interest in adopting a serious political program that would truly involve the Lebanese Shi'a in the Lebanese system. These examples and several others support the hypothesis that Hezbollah has spent little time or perhaps has no desire to think about how it might one day become a normal, or traditional, political actor, subject to the laws and sovereignty of the state.

Another reason why Hezbollah's objectives are unclear is because it does not operate alone. It enjoys an organic alliance with Iran and a strategic partnership with whatever is left of the Syrian government, both of which very much influence its preferences, needs, and concerns. It is not unreasonable to assume that most of Hezbollah's

monumental decisions throughout its history have been made in consultation with its closest guardian Iran, given the large amount of aid Hezbollah receives from Iran in terms of money and weapons, not to mention other intangibles from which it benefits, including religious guidance and ideological justification and indoctrination. The party has room for independent action when it comes to its own interests in Lebanon, but on vital issues of war and peace and regional affairs, it is in lockstep with Tehran, pursuing a joint agenda molded around the policies and preferences of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), Iran's elite paramilitary unit.

While it is rare that Iran and Hezbollah's visions and interests clash, the conflict in Syria presents an interesting case. History of course will judge whether the party's

participation in the war has served its long-term interests. But today, a quick glance at the considerable human and material losses and psychological scars Hezbollah has suffered following its intervention makes it difficult to envisage a brighter future for the organization. Did Hezbollah really want to go to Syria? Or, equally important, can it withdraw in better shape than it entered?

The Syrian Dilemma

This summer, Hezbollah was supposed to celebrate the 10th anniversary of its 34-day conflict with Israel, which according to party chief Hassan Nasrallah, resulted in a "divine victory".² However, the group was in no mood to be joyful, because it continues

² Michael Slackman, and John O'Neil, "Hezbollah Chief Leads Huge Rally," New York Times, September 22, 2006 <http://www.nytimes.com/2006/09/22/world/middleeast/23lebanoncn.html>

to be mired in a protracted war in Syria and is busy facing the toughest challenge in its three decades of existence. The Syrian conflict is estimated to have taken the lives of more Hezbollah fighters in four years than in the entire period of resisting Israel's occupation of south Lebanon between 1982 and 2000. Hezbollah is struggling to maintain morale among its Shi'ite support base as war fatigue grows. Formerly hailed as the champion of anti-Israel resistance across the Islamic world, today Hezbollah is vilified by Sunni Muslims for its support of the Assad regime. Once respected for its financial probity, Hezbollah in recent years has seen the cancer of corruption taking root within its ranks as the organization has grown in size and power. Lately, it has faced a financial crunch; the result of financing its Syria intervention, a reduction in funds from Iran due to the

downturn in oil prices, and measures taken by the United States to locate and sever its global revenue streams and threaten sanctions against commercial entities dealing with the organization.

Even though Nasrallah's initial justification for his party's intervention in Syria lacked credibility and was couched in sectarian overtones – to protect holy Shi'ite shrines near the Lebanese-Syrian border – there was no escaping a more honest rendering of the truth later on, as the conflict dragged on and it became impossible to hide the fact that Hezbollah was sending scores of its men to the Syrian battlefield.

Yet regardless of what Hezbollah's ultimate ambitions are, the party assumes critical and ongoing military responsibilities that are immensely helpful to Iran: deterring a large-scale Israeli attack against Iran, or if it fails,

punishing Israel with salvos of rockets and missiles that would influence the course of a potential Iran-Israel war. Hezbollah's deterrence role, for it to be effective and long term, requires a friendly regime in Damascus that not only supplies intelligence and weapons but also facilitates Iranian arms shipments from Tehran. Should Syria fall in the hands of adversaries who most probably would cut Hezbollah's supply routes, Hezbollah would have a much harder time sustaining its military and deterrent role. While it is true that weapons smuggling in the Middle East is as sure as paying taxes, it is practically much easier and less costly to do so through land routes, as opposed to plane cargos flown from Tehran to Beirut.

Yet as strategically significant as the preservation of the Syrian regime is to Hezbollah and Iran, it goes without

saying that Hezbollah first and foremost has to remain alive in order to be able to fulfill any of its goals and responsibilities. However, the proliferation of well-armed, extremist fighters in Syria as a result of the militarization of the Syrian conflict posed then as it does now a direct existential threat not only to Hezbollah but to Lebanon overall.

Despite the intense political polarization in Beirut between those who are with the Syrian government and those who oppose it, few disagree with the notion that a powerful and sizable Salafi jihadi presence along the Lebanese-Syrian border represents a huge threat to Lebanon. However, the issue was, and continues to be, how Lebanon could best counter it. That Hezbollah did not bother to consult with the country's political class and key factions ahead of its profoundly consequential decision to get involved

in an open-ended war on foreign land totally violated constitutional principles and deepened others' distrust of the party.

It is no secret that Hezbollah is the most powerful military actor in Lebanon, one who is far more capable than even the country's armed forces. Therefore, Lebanon has a much better chance of protecting itself from Salafi jihadism and at least containing the Syrian spillover (the country already has more than a million refugees on its soil) should Hezbollah take a leading security and military role, with the support and coordination of the Lebanese military. Putting aside for a moment that the very idea of a militia making decisions of war and peace on behalf of the entire country is profoundly antithetical to political normalcy and statecraft, the military strategy that Hezbollah has chosen to

adopt to prevent Jabhat Al Nusra and the Islamic State from creating a safe haven in Lebanon is worth scrutinizing.

Judged by the sight of thousands of Hezbollah fighters operating inside Syria today (anywhere between 5,000 to 10,000 depending on operational needs), it is evident that the Shi'ite party has opted to go on the offensive and has chosen a strategy of preemption. For Hezbollah, defense, no matter how fortified the Lebanese-Syrian border was, was not an option. To eliminate or at least minimize the Salafi jihadi threat, Hezbollah decided, or perhaps was instructed by Tehran, to take the fight to the enemy.

Such tactical accomplishments by Hezbollah, which could easily be reversed should Russia stop its aerial operations for whatever reason, Iran adjust or reduce its military role,

or a war with Israel on the southern front break out, have not come without considerable costs too. It is unclear how many fighters the party has lost since it began intervening in Syria in mid-2012, but it is reasonable to assert that at least 2,000 have died by now, with perhaps three times that number wounded, some with life-changing injuries. To place that figure into context, in around four years, Hezbollah has lost nearly double the 1,284 officially recognized “martyrs” who died resisting Israel’s occupation of south Lebanon between 1982 and 2000.

While it looks like the tide of the war in Syria is currently turning in Hezbollah’s favor (Russian air cover has been extremely helpful for ground operations), it is still premature to speak of strategic victories by any side and evaluate with any degree of confidence whether the

party’s military strategy has succeeded. The Syrian civil war is anything but stable and will continue to witness various ebbs and flows as long as regional and international parties remain committed to backing their proxies with money and weapons. As difficult as it is to imagine a rebel victory today given the important losses in Aleppo and elsewhere, the war’s stalemate is not expected to break anytime soon, which will force Hezbollah to stay involved militarily.

A Balancing Act

For the time being, Hezbollah, with the help of the Lebanese military, has managed to prevent Sunni extremist fighters from entering Lebanon in large numbers. And despite the presence of a small number of extremist fighters across the borders and operating inside Lebanon’s northern

region (in the town of Aarsal, for example), one could say that dangerous leaks have been effectively stopped, although this can mostly be attributed to the Lebanese Sunni community's historical rejection of violent Sunni extremism. Indeed, had the north been fertile ground for such an influence, it would have been much more challenging for Hezbollah to block systematic infiltration.

But no war takes place in a political vacuum, and even if the Syrian regime survives, the biggest price Hezbollah is likely to continue to pay for its Syria intervention is its profoundly damaged standing in Lebanon and the region. Surely no one in Lebanon, or the region for that matter, has the desire and/or capability to stand up to Hezbollah or force it to change its ways. Even the United States during its most interventionist days in the Middle East under the George

W. Bush administration failed to degrade Hezbollah. On the contrary, all it did, by supporting Israel's reckless 2006 military campaign against Lebanon, was embolden the group and weaken its pro-US domestic adversaries.

However, as it is often said in the mafia world, the difference between being loved and being feared is huge. That Hezbollah currently enjoys the latter, not the former, is nothing short of a transformational change in its relations with other communities and might be unsustainable. The Middle East has entered a period of strategic uncertainty which could be very dangerous. The intensity of the Iran-Saudi Arabia regional power struggle has reached alarming levels; the crisis in Yemen has escalated and is slowly but surely becoming an intractable conflict; Russia has imposed

its preferences on the Middle East through sheer force and has reemerged as a major security player in the region; the fight against the Islamic State, while on the surface seems to be going in the right direction given the advances of the Iraqi army in Mosul, is at risk of generating even more sectarian killing and disorder due to the lack of political progress and societal reconciliation among Kurds and Arabs, and Sunnis and Shi'ites. All of this, along with the devastating Syrian conflict, will make for an unpredictable cauldron of instability in the region in the next few years. Caught in the middle of it is Hezbollah, fighting for a Syrian ally whose survival might ironically even be more problematic for the Shi'ite party than its death.

All signs suggest that Hezbollah is exhausted and laser focused on the conflict in Syria. This does not mean that

the party has forgotten about its enmity toward and struggle against Israel. But it does suggest that Hezbollah sees no bigger and more urgent priority than Syria. It may talk about the plight of Shi'ites or co-religionists in Bahrain and Yemen for domestic consumption, but its real and tangible commitment is Syria, and will remain so for a while.

On the other hand, in the past decade, Hezbollah has swelled enormously in terms of manpower and weaponry. It has the capability in a potential next war with Israel to bring normal life to a halt in the Jewish state. It possesses guided rockets that can strike specific targets as far south of Lebanon as Tel Aviv; its anti-ship missiles have sufficient range to effectively blockade Israel's coastline; and its suspected air-defense assets will complicate Israel's traditionally unhampered domination of the air space.

Hezbollah's cadres have amassed new war-fighting skills in Syria and, most importantly, have gained critical combat experience in a brutal theater. Israeli military officials acknowledge that Hezbollah constitutes the Jewish state's most formidable threat, illustrating that the military power of this non-state actor is comparable to that of a state.

But conventional wisdom suggests that Hezbollah may not survive another war with Israel, especially at a time when it seems overstretched and vulnerable. How could a non-state actor, despite its impressive military capabilities and well-known determination to fight, engage in combat on two fronts simultaneously when many nation-states would be unable to? Another round with Israel will most probably be much more destructive than 2006, but should it happen,

Hezbollah is perfectly capable of waging war, perhaps even more effectively than before, largely because it is a different kind of hybrid warfare, and because of its much improved military capabilities, its heightened training and readiness, and its new offensive strategy (Hezbollah, which currently can hit any target in Israel with increased precision, has threatened to invade towns in the northern part of Israel during the next confrontation).

Yet beyond military analyses, another conflict with Israel, at least one that does not decimate Hezbollah and Lebanon as a whole, could, ironically, bring back life to Hezbollah. Sure, its timing would be extremely unfortunate and exigencies extremely taxing given the priority of military engagement in Syria, but its very occurrence would change the narrative in the

region in ways that might raise Hezbollah's popularity once again (though the days of Hezbollah's high popularity in the Arab world, and particularly in the Gulf region, are long gone. Most Arab Gulf states oppose Hezbollah and are developing closer relations with Israel as a strategy for checking Iran). Nothing boosts Hezbollah's standing in the region, at least among its supporters, like a fight against Israel, which the party will sell, as it always has done masterfully, as a "divine victory." Also, nothing provides Hezbollah with a sense of purpose like a war with Israel.

However, times have changed, and what was once a more accommodating and understanding Lebanese Shi'ite constituency regarding justifications made by the ever charismatic Hassan Nasrallah has now gotten used to peace in the south.

Ten years have passed since 2006, and no southerner has an interest in risking this period of calm. The Lebanese Shi'ite community's questions regarding Syria directed at Hezbollah started piling on after a series of bombings, caused by Sunni extremists, rocked the southern suburbs of Beirut. The cracks in the bond between Hezbollah and its constituency should not be exaggerated, but they are there, and could rise to the surface should major and avoidable troubles befall the Shi'ite community. It helps that there is no credible alternative to Hezbollah for Lebanon's Shi'ites but it doesn't mean that Hezbollah takes its support-base for granted or has total control over it. As Hezbollah has learned over the years, what Tehran prefers and what works for it does not always jibe with the Lebanese Shi'ite community. Hezbollah is not in a position to rebuff or question Tehran's wishes, but

it also cannot afford to dismiss the Lebanese Shi'ite street's pulse. Unity within the Shi'ite community is the ultimate safety net for Hezbollah and it is far more consequential than any of its other sources of support, including its link with Iran. This balancing act will always haunt Hezbollah, but it may also save it from itself and ultimately force it to transform into something it admittedly has never been: a normal, unarmed political entity.

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