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## The evolved, regional Hezbollah

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***Hezbollah's direct or indirect involvement in the regional conflicts with Shia elements, namely Syria, Iraq and Yemen, has altered the public perception of the group in the Middle East. At the same time, it has taken a sharp turn against the Gulf, primarily Saudi Arabia, as an extension of its fighting against jihadist groups in Syria, but also because of the group's closer cooperation with Iran.***

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Due to its involvement in Syria, Hezbollah is very different than its 2006 self. Having always been an insurgent group, now it is learning counterinsurgency tactics; its commanders have gained invaluable battlefield experience with sophisticated weapon systems, and are now responsible for commanding hundreds of fighters in a single battle. Its army has grown to include a standing force of 21,000 and a total of 45,000 fighters, while its arsenal has increased tenfold, now possessing more than 100,000 short-range rockets and thousands of precision missiles, in addition to a supply of anti-aircraft, anti-ship, and anti-tank missiles.<sup>1</sup>

However, Hezbollah's military success does not mean political success. Its popular support has waned, both in Lebanon and the broader region. The main reason for this is that its military involvement in Syria has been interpreted as an intervention on behalf of the country's Alawite minority against its Sunni Majority, and therefore as a divisive factor.<sup>2</sup> In addition, the group's selective participation in the conflicts of the region – Syria, Yemen and Iraq- has reinforced the notion that it has a new pan-Shi'a focus. Once treated as a Lebanese national resistance movement, now Hezbollah is creating a Shiite axis along with Iran and Syria, with military and political presence that stretches from Damascus, to Bagdad, to Sanaa. Fighting against Israel and contesting political space within Lebanon have degraded to matters of somewhat secondary importance.

Hezbollah is aware that it appears more Shia; nevertheless, it does not embrace this new image. It has spent decades in presenting itself as an Arab, Lebanese, non-sectarian actor; now, being heavily engaged in Syria, the group is more cautious and keen to avoid any internal strife that could degenerate into a Sunni-Shia war in Lebanon. Hezbollah has branded its involvement in Syria as a matter of national security, claiming that should they not fight the jihadists there they would infiltrate Lebanon. Its leader, Hassan Nasrallah, has repeatedly stated that the group fights against the Saudi-exported Wahhabi ideology, and branded the talks of a sectarian conflict between Sunnis and Shia as "Saudi propaganda".<sup>3</sup>

The political climate within Lebanon has also changed for Hezbollah. There has been some domestic blowback from Lebanese intellectuals, academic, journalists and politicians; its failure to impose the election of its favorite candidate for the presidency, Michel Aoun, is viewed as a sign of a weakened Hezbollah. Many believe that Hezbollah's interference in Syria has turned Lebanon into a target for terrorist groups. Nevertheless, even as Lebanese Shiites have endured substantial losses because of Hezbollah's involvement in Syria, its core Shia constituency remains largely intact.

Recently, Hezbollah has put itself in a position of direct confrontation with the Gulf States. The Saudi-led Gulf Cooperation Council designated the group as a terrorist organization on March, and the Arab League and OIC followed afterwards, while Bahrain, Kuwait and the UAE have deported a number of individuals for alleged links with Hezbollah. The latter's shift of attention towards the Gulf became more clear after Nasrallah's claims on September that the Saudi-financed Wahhabi school of thought is "more evil than Israel".<sup>4</sup>

To be sure, Hezbollah's strife with Saudi Arabia can be seen to a certain extent as a result of the escalation of tensions between Saudi Arabia and Iran and the greater Sunni-Shi'a division; there are indications that Iran itself has advised the military wing of Hezbollah to suspend operations against Israel and turn towards Saudi Arabia.<sup>5</sup> By the same token, Saudi Arabia is considering Hezbollah as a pawn of Iran. However, Hezbollah has reasons of its own for turning against Saudi Arabia and its Gulf allies; it has long been putting the blame on Riyadh for supporting and arming terrorist groups throughout the region, and has been fighting and incurring losses at the hands of these Saudi-financed and –armed groups, as well as seeing Saudi Arabia supporting anti-Shi'a groups elsewhere in the region. This umbrage became more personal for Hezbollah after the assassination of its military commander in Syria, Mustafa Badreddine, by "takfir" forces supported by Riyadh.<sup>6</sup>

Nevertheless, Hezbollah's pivot towards the Gulf should not be seen as a pivot away from Israel. In Hezbollah's rhetoric, Saudi Arabia is to blame for the normalization of the situation with Israel.<sup>7</sup> The group is welcoming their training and experience from the military expeditions in Syria, but it is not looking for a confrontation with Israel in the near future. Firstly, it prefers not to be divided between two fronts,

the Syrian and Israeli one, and secondly it has no reason to start a war that might be fatal for its infrastructure. In addition, the political climate in Lebanon is not as conducive for war as it was in 2006, and the possible damages inflicted by the Israeli army would likely weaken its standing in Lebanon even more. Nonetheless, Hezbollah has maintained significant capabilities to fight Israel, should it be provoked by the latter. And if something such as this occurs, it is possible that for the first time Hezbollah will be able to conduct a war into Israeli territory.<sup>8</sup>

A combination of self-interest, personal ties and geopolitical considerations led Hezbollah to identify itself with the survival of Bashar al-Assad. Syria always represented a safe haven for weapon storage, training and travel; moreover, Hezbollah, Iran and Syria formed the “axis of resistance”, which seeks to confront Israel along with Western and Sunni interests in the Middle East. The idea of replacing Assad with a more Western-friendly government, in addition to threats from jihadist groups, forced Hezbollah to intervene militarily in Syria. It is highly unlikely that it will abandon its ally now, as Hezbollah is determined to brand its intervention as a success; in Nasrallah’s words, “whether the Russians leave or stay—more than that, whether the Iranians leave or stay...we, Hezbollah...our fate and the fate of our Syrian brothers is one and indivisible.”<sup>9</sup>

As for Hezbollah’s relationship with Iran, it has also changed. First of all, they have been drawn even closer because of their operational cooperation in Iraq and especially in Syria; since September 2015, Hezbollah has been part of an operations center in Damascus that includes Russian and Iranian elements. In addition, as Hezbollah is gaining a larger role in the region, its partnership with Iran grows stronger; its strengthened ties with the Arab Shiites, indicated by the group’s presence in Yemen and in the Gulf, are useful for Iran. In the latter’s plan to approach Shiites across the region, Hezbollah is becoming a much more useful partner, one able to advise Iran on issues about the Arab Shia. Meanwhile Nasrallah has recently admitted that his group receives full financial and arms support from Iran.<sup>10</sup>

What is more, historically, Hezbollah’s legitimacy and credibility was based on its determined support for armed Palestinian resistance movements. However, the shift of primary focus from fighting Israel to fighting Jihadists in Syria, along with its siding with the Assad regime, has strained ties between Hezbollah and its closest Palestinian ally, Hamas. Nevertheless, since Hamas rebranded its stance in Syria to a neutral one, along with its efforts to preserve contacts with Iran, the estrangement between the two groups is not likely to last much longer.<sup>11</sup>

While Hezbollah is gaining military experience on the Syrian battlefields, it is losing popular support throughout the region, even though its Shia base in Lebanon remains largely intact. Fighting against jihadists and turning more aggressively against Saudi Arabia and Wahhabism altered Hezbollah’s public image, making it appear much more Shia than previously. At the same time, its ties with Iran are now closer than ever, due to their intimate cooperation. In any case, it is obvious that Hezbollah has been evolved into a key regional player, and it is likely that it will be part of the future security architecture in the Middle East along with its allies, Syria, Iraq and Iran.<sup>12</sup>

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