



## The Enduring Iran-Syria-Hezbollah Axis

By Michael Rubin

*The Obama administration would like to move Syria into the camp of more moderate Arab states, but there is scant evidence that Syria is willing to give up its support for terrorist organizations. Like Iran, it remains a destabilizing and dangerous force in the region.*

The 2006 war between Lebanon and Israel took not only outside observers by surprise, but also Israel and the government of Lebanon. A day after an operation in which Hezbollah killed five Israeli soldiers and captured two others, the Israel Defense Forces struck Lebanese targets as far north as Beirut. Over subsequent days, the Israeli Air Force bombed Hezbollah-controlled neighborhoods in Beirut and struck targets in the country's north. U.S., European, and Arab diplomats scrambled to prevent the spread of hostilities. While Arab governments remained conspicuously silent, unwilling to support Hezbollah publicly, if at all, Iranian authorities egged on the militia. Speaking six days after the war began, Gholam-Ali Haddad-Adel, the speaker of Iran's parliament, declared, "To Hassan Nasrallah [Hezbollah's secretary general] we say, well done. This religious scholar roars like a lion, and the blood of Imam [Ruhollah] Khomeini rages in his veins."<sup>1</sup> Iran's supreme leader encouraged Hezbollah to keep fighting. According to Nasrallah, Ali Khamenei sent him a letter two days after the war began, which stated, "You have a hard war ahead, but if you resist, you will triumph."<sup>2</sup>

United Nations (UN) Security Council Resolution 1701 restored calm, but only a tenuous one. While the UN Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) returned to Lebanon, it failed to

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prevent the resupply of Hezbollah with an arsenal even more advanced than before the 2006 conflict. The Lebanese and Israeli border may be calm today, but the potential for regional conflict has only grown. If a new conflict erupts, it likely will be deadlier and harder to contain to Israel and Lebanon. Hezbollah now possesses missiles capable of striking not only Haifa, but also Tel Aviv.<sup>3</sup>

The Obama administration, meanwhile, has reached out diplomatically to both Syria and Iran in the belief that a less confrontational approach to conflict resolution might lead the two states to reconsider their rejectionist behavior. It has not worked. While Tehran and Damascus may welcome the incentives inherent in U.S. engagement, both states continue to use proxies to pursue radical aims and undercut stability. Iran

### Key points in this Outlook:

- The Lebanese and Israeli border is calmer today than during the 2006 war, but the potential for regional conflict is great.
- Both the Syrian and Iranian governments have used Hezbollah to conduct proxy warfare against Israel.
- The Obama administration has tried to move Syria from a rejectionist state into the more moderate Arab camp, but there is no evidence that the engagement policy has worked.

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## A Proxy Is Born

Hezbollah formed against the backdrop of Israel's 1982 invasion of Lebanon as an Iranian proxy. Ali Mohtashimi, Iran's ambassador to Syria from 1982 to 1985, discussed the group's beginnings in an interview with the Iranian newspaper *Sharq* on August 3, 2008:

After the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982, Ayatollah Khomeini changed his mind about sending large forces to Syria and Lebanon. . . . I was really worried about Syria and Lebanon. I went to Tehran and met with Ayatollah Khomeini. As I was worried about Lebanon and enthusiastic about the idea of sending forces to Syria and Lebanon, I started talking about our responsibilities and what was going on in Lebanon. The imam cooled me down and said the forces we send to Syria and Lebanon would need huge logistical support. . . . The only remaining way is to train the Shi'a men there, and so Hezbollah was born.<sup>4</sup>

The Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) supported the new group as it fought or co-opted other Shia militias in southern Lebanon. The Iranian government is not shy about credit. On May 14, 2009, the London-based pan-Arab daily *Ash-Sharq al-Awsat* published an interview with Mohammad Hassan Akhtari, the Islamic Republic's ambassador to Syria from 1986 to 1997, and again from 2005 through 2007. Correspondent Manal Lufti described Akhtari as "the operational father" of

Hezbollah, "engineer of the special relationship" between Syria and Iran, and "coordinator of Iran's relations with Palestinian organizations in Damascus," groups listed annually as terrorist organizations in the State Department's *Country Reports on Terrorism*.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, according to *Ash-Sharq al-Awsat*, "the Iranian embassy in Damascus became the most important Iranian embassy in the world. It represented something akin to a 'regional center' for Iran's diplomatic activities that extended from Damascus to Beirut and the Palestinian territories and became privy to files on several matters, chief of which was Iran's relations with Syria, Hezbollah, [and] the Palestinian organizations."<sup>6</sup>

Iran and Syria worked jointly to unify the Shia who, through the early 1980s, were divided between Amal and Hezbollah. Akhtari described how he and Ghazi Kanaan, the Syrian intelligence chief in Lebanon, met over months to manage reconciliation, which ultimately led to the victory of Hezbollah, the more religious of the two groups.<sup>7</sup> While Syria cultivated a reputation for secularism among many Western academics, Akhtari describes a different regime.<sup>8</sup> "The late President Hafiz al-Asad trusted Ayatollah Khomeini and respected him. He was one of those who believed that any opposition to the Islamic Republic in any shape or form and under whatever pretext amounted to treason to the Arab, Islamic, and Palestinian causes."<sup>9</sup> By 1988, Hezbollah was the dominant force not only in southern Lebanon, where it painted itself as the vanguard of resistance against Israel's occupation, but also in Beirut, which would remain under Syrian occupation for the next seventeen years.

Hezbollah thrived under Syrian occupation. Both the Syrian and Iranian governments used Hezbollah to conduct proxy warfare against Israel. Symbolism is important in the Middle East. In April 2001, when Nasrallah met Khamenei, Nasrallah kissed Khamenei's hand, symbolizing fealty.<sup>10</sup> In the decade before Israel's 2000 withdrawal from southern Lebanon, Hezbollah conducted more than three dozen suicide attacks against Israeli forces in Lebanon.<sup>11</sup> Between Israel's withdrawal and the eruption of war between Israel and Lebanon, Hezbollah conducted twenty-one additional operations against Israel itself.<sup>12</sup>

The Syrian government not only turned a blind eye toward the group's activities in Lebanon as Hezbollah systematically worked to undercut that state's sovereignty, but also facilitated a supply of Iranian missiles to Hezbollah. As Patrick Devenny, Henry M. Jackson

National Security Fellow at the Center for Security Policy in Washington, D.C., noted in a prescient article six months before the 2006 war, “The Hezbollah missile threat to Israel has expanded not only in quantity but also in quality. In recent years, the group’s operational artillery reach has grown. Experts and analysts generally put the Hezbollah rocket force somewhere between 10,000 and 12,000 missiles. The heart of this arsenal remains rooted in Hezbollah’s massive stocks—perhaps 7,000 to 8,000—of 107mm and 122mm Katyusha rockets, virtually all of which were supplied directly from existing Iranian army stocks.”<sup>13</sup>

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The Israel Defense Forces’ failure to eradicate Hezbollah in the 2006 war led many analysts to declare Hezbollah the victor.<sup>14</sup> Hezbollah had survived Israel’s onslaught and become the first Arab entity to hit Haifa since Israel’s founding in 1948.<sup>15</sup> Robert G. Rabil, director of graduate studies at Florida Atlantic University and a well-regarded Syria and Lebanon analyst, went further, suggesting that Hezbollah’s rise may have come at Syria’s expense.<sup>16</sup>

### Is Syria Still Important?

Syria enabled Hezbollah’s rise. It became the transit point for Iranian arms. In addition, Syria provided crucial safe haven for offices, personnel, and organization, not only for Hezbollah, but also for Palestinian terror groups and, since 2003, Islamist terrorists operating in Iraq. Through it all, Iranian support has been key.

In a 1996 speech to the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, then–secretary of state Warren Christopher noted that Iran provides significant financial assistance to many terrorist groups that maintain offices in Lebanon. “Iran has not stopped at rhetoric. It meets frequently with all the major terrorist groups—including Hezbollah, Hamas, Palestinian Islamic Jihad, and the PFLP-GC [Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine–General Command]. . . . It provides them with money—up to several million dollars a year in the case of Hamas, Islamic Jihad, and others, and up to \$100 million a year for Hezbollah alone. Iran also supplies them with arms and material support, training,

and—in some cases—operational guidance.”<sup>17</sup> More recently, Western diplomats in Lebanon estimate that Iranian assistance to Hezbollah is closer to \$200 million annually.<sup>18</sup>

The arms trade continues through Syria. As the German military prepared to enforce the prohibition on Hezbollah resupply under terms of its UNIFIL mandate, the German news magazine *Focus* reported on October 9, 2006, that Germany’s Federal Intelligence Service (*Bundesnachrichtendienst*, BND) had concluded that the Islamic Republic had already resupplied missiles to Hezbollah in the aftermath of the war. The BND reported that the resupply had occurred over land through Syria.<sup>19</sup> In 2008, Akhtari estimated that the volume of total trade ranged from \$2.5 to \$3 billion.<sup>20</sup> While illegal arms are but a tiny fraction of that figure, such trade traditionally provides cover for arms transfers. On May 29, 2007, for example, a Turkish train carrying construction supplies from Iran to Syria hit a mine allegedly laid by a Kurdish terrorist group and derailed. Police discovered an undeclared cache of Iranian arms, including rocket launchers and rifles.<sup>21</sup> The Turkish route into Syria may become more important as Turkish prime minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan tightens relations with both Tehran and Damascus. Regardless, Iranian cargo planes land frequently at Damascus International Airport.<sup>22</sup> Suspicion over their role in the illicit weapons trade led the European Union to sanction Iran Air Cargo.<sup>23</sup>

Hezbollah is not the only recipient of Iranian largesse on Syrian territory. Matthew Levitt, a former Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) terror and financial analyst, noted in congressional testimony that estimates of Iranian assistance to Hamas ranged between \$20 million and \$50 million each year through the 1990s.<sup>24</sup> Much of this money was and still is channeled through Hezbollah.<sup>25</sup> Upon Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat’s death in 2004, for example, Iranian intelligence reportedly channeled \$22 million through Hezbollah to fund Palestinian terrorist groups more sympathetic to the Iranian line.<sup>26</sup>

The assassination of Hezbollah terrorist Imad Mughniyeh in Damascus highlights the crucial role Syria plays in international terrorism, regardless of its diplomatic posturing. On February 12, 2008, a car bomb in Damascus killed Mughniyeh, a fixture on the FBI’s most-wanted list until his death. In the wake of Mughniyeh’s death, Akhtari’s comments highlighted the importance of Syria in the terror nexus. “We trust Syria,” the Iranian ambassador explained. “It is their concern more than ours because Mughniyeh was their guest in Damascus

and, of course, because of the close relations between Hezbollah and Syria.”<sup>27</sup> Indeed, Hezbollah agents may do Syria and Iran’s dirty work, not only against Israel and Western forces in Iraq, but also against Lebanon itself. A lengthy UN investigation of the assassination of former Lebanese premier Rafik Hariri appears ready to finger Hezbollah as the trigger party.<sup>28</sup>

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## Syria Remains Pivotal

Desire to make progress on the Middle East peace process, unravel the Syria-Iran axis, and end Syrian support for terrorism motivates the Obama administration’s efforts to flip Syria diplomatically from its role as a rejectionist state into the more moderate camp populated by countries like Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Iraq, and Jordan, which may not always be pro-American in the expression of their foreign policy, but at least keep their support for terrorism indirect and do not countenance Iranian influence.<sup>29</sup>

There is no evidence, however, that the State Department’s engagement policy has worked. Syrian concessions—allowing the American Cultural Center to reopen, for example—have been halfhearted and more than offset by revelations of continued Syrian proliferation efforts and its facilitation of terror.<sup>30</sup> Nor does it appear that Tehran and Damascus have loosened their relations. Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad has met Syrian president Bashar Assad repeatedly, most recently last month in Turkey.<sup>31</sup> Welcoming Syrian foreign minister Walid al-Muallim to Tehran on November 5, 2009, Ahmadinejad said, “Comprehensive Tehran-Damascus relations keep getting deeper, wiser, and stronger with the passage of each new day, and such relations are not easily subjected to other developments.”<sup>32</sup>

Meanwhile, successful U.S. and Israeli interdiction efforts of Iranian arms at high sea, while embarrassing to Iran, have made Syria’s role as a route for weapons delivery more important. The last decade has witnessed several high-profile interceptions of weapons:

- On January 29, 2001, the Israeli Navy seized two containers of weapons, reportedly offloaded in watertight containers by the *Calypso*, a Lebanese arms-smuggling ship.
- On May 7, 2001, the Israeli Navy seized the *Santorini* while it was on its fourth arms-smuggling mission. This ship carried 107mm rockets, mortars, rocket-propelled grenades, antiaircraft missiles, and antitank weaponry.
- On January 3, 2002, the Israeli Navy intercepted the *Karine-A*, a Gaza-bound freighter, while it was on the Red Sea. Onboard, naval commandos found fifty tons of sophisticated Iranian weaponry.<sup>33</sup>
- On May 20, 2003, the Israeli Navy intercepted the *Abu Hassan*, a fishing vessel carrying weapons, explosives, and detonators.<sup>34</sup>
- On January 19–20, 2009, the U.S. Navy intercepted the *Monchegorsk*, an Iranian freighter carrying military supplies to Syria in violation of UN Security Council Resolution 1559.<sup>35</sup>
- On November 4, 2009, the Israeli Navy intercepted the *Franco*, an Antigua-flagged vessel that was allegedly carrying three hundred tons of Iranian weaponry to Hezbollah.<sup>36</sup>

The importance of Syria grows as authorities in Tehran make clear their commitment to support Hezbollah and Palestinian groups, which the United States considers terrorists. When Ahmadinejad visited Damascus last spring, he met with the leaders of Damascus-based terrorist groups and promised them continued support.<sup>37</sup> Less than three weeks later, Ali Larijani, the speaker of the parliament whom some American journalists dub a pragmatist,<sup>38</sup> declared, “We are proud to defend Hamas and Hezbollah. We are not trying to hide it. They are fighters in the path of God, and you can call them whatever you like,” adding that the idea that Tehran would ever abandon the two groups was a “U.S. dream.”<sup>39</sup>

## The Danger of Syria’s Safe Haven

Syria’s continued support for terrorists and other foreign fighters undermines any diplomatic gains the United

States achieves. Because of Syria, UN Security Council Resolution 1701 has failed to prevent Hezbollah's rearmament. Meanwhile, the IRGC has more political power now than at any previous point in its history.<sup>40</sup> As such, statements by its commander that "in the near future, we will witness the destruction of Israel, the aggressor, this cancerous microbe Israel, at the able hands of the soldiers of the community of Hezbollah," should raise concerns in Washington and European capitals about the possibility of a regional conflagration.<sup>41</sup>

Recent reports that Iran transshipped gas masks and chemical weapons through Syria to Hezbollah should only heighten concern as the Islamic Republic increases its defiance in international discussions about its nuclear activities.<sup>42</sup> Across the U.S. political spectrum, analysts agree that, should Israel, the United States, or any other power strike at Iran's nuclear facilities, the Islamic Republic would respond, at least in part, by activating its proxy terrorist networks. Palestinian groups in Gaza, Hezbollah in Lebanon, and foreign fighters in Iraq all have Syrian support in common.<sup>43</sup> Not only Hezbollah's rhetoric but also its track record suggest a willingness to attack Western targets, should war against Iran erupt.

Given both the circumstances and the stakes, it is ironic that U.S. officials continue to accept the fiction of Syrian sincerity. As difficult as stopping terrorist supplies may be, the likelihood that proxy groups will voluntarily forfeit their capability is low, and the cost of allowing terrorists to use such arms is high.

## Notes

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