

EDA INSIGHT

أكاديمية الإمارات الدبلوماسية
EMIRATES DIPLOMATIC ACADEMY

Hezbollah Beyond the Syrian Conflict

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February 2017

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Summary

- At home in Lebanon, Hezbollah's involvement in Syria has exacerbated sectarian tensions and has triggered discontent from both its Shia constituency and its Sunni opponents. However, it still keeps a tight grip on the south of the country and remains the primary military power there. The recent appointment of its Christian ally, Michel Aoun, as Lebanon's President, indicates the Party's enduring political influence in Beirut.
- At the regional level, after having been active for more than five years in the conflict in Syria, Hezbollah suffered major losses in terms of battle death rate and leadership killed. Nevertheless, the group has turned into a small but significant player in Middle Eastern conflicts. It is still able to sustain its war efforts both in Syria and Lebanon, while it is also getting involved elsewhere in the region.
- Despite setbacks, Hezbollah obtained significant warfighting experience during its times in Syria - both in terms of offensive tactics in complex environments as well as with regard to the conduct of combined operations with international allies (Iran and Russia).
- Iranians and Hezbollah have been transferring a significant amount of the Syrian missile arsenal to Lebanon and appear to be turning the Golan region into a new forward operating base to target Israel. Israel has responded with increased air raids. A potential new war between Israel and Hezbollah could occur on two fronts: South Lebanon and the Golan region.
- In addition to its heavy presence in Lebanon and Syria, Hezbollah has widened its regional agenda and continued to expand its regional training role. In Yemen, as of today, the exact level of Hezbollah involvement is hard to measure but most observers agree that it is likely to be far less significant than in Iraq and Syria.
- That said, the Hezbollah model could be emulated by Iranian Revolutionary Guards elsewhere in the region, with a special emphasis on the diffusion of its military know-how in the field of insurgency tactics and missile warfare.
- Hezbollah's role in the Middle East will most likely evolve between increased assertiveness and the risk of overstretch. In this perspective, some important issues for policymakers are worth exploring as their outcome could well lead to one scenario or another:
 - *How is Hezbollah preparing itself for the day after the Syrian war?*
 - *As Hezbollah's military skills and political role develop, how will this affect its patronage relation with Iran?*
 - *How long is the Party able to contain sectarian escalation in Lebanon?*
 - *How to build a strong and reliable Lebanese security alternative to Hezbollah?*

The Issue

Hezbollah played a significant role in the Syrian regime's brutal takeover of Aleppo in the last battle of December 2016, albeit at high costs. Beyond doubt, the real change in the balance of powers on the battlefield was triggered by Russia's involvement in the conflict. Moscow, with great fire power, supported the Syrian regime along with Iranian forces as well as Hezbollah's militia. That said, it is worth reflecting on the evolution of the Lebanese militia through the Syrian conflict and beyond to understand the impact of the experience it gained in terms of offensive tactics in complex environments and the conduct of combined operations with international allies (Iran and Russia).

More than ten years have passed since Hezbollah fought its last major conflict against Israel. The 2006 war brought massive damage to Lebanon, destroyed Beirut International Airport and caused high civilian casualties (1,109 deaths and 4,399 injured).¹ In the aftermath of the conflict, as the headquarters of the 'Party of God' in the Beirut suburbs was completely destroyed by the intensive Israeli air campaign, observers speculated that Hezbollah would swiftly collapse in front of Lebanese opponents. However, as we flash forward to 2017, despite the fact that it has lost men as well as support, Hezbollah seems in some ways more powerful now, both politically and militarily.

Over the last decade, the organization has evolved into a regional actor intervening not only in the Lebanese theater but also on the Syria-Iraq battleground. This regional reach has had obvious setbacks: Hezbollah is said to have lost almost a third of all its combatants who fought in Syria and discontent inside Lebanon has grown, not in the least from the members of its constituency who do not feel at ease with the Party exacerbating local sectarian tensions.

Still, Hezbollah has shown an ability to reach distant areas such as the Arabian Peninsula, in particular conflict-torn Yemen. Hezbollah can today rely on combatants who gained warfighting experience on the Syrian battleground while its missile inventory deployed in Lebanon got upgraded from rudimentary rockets to mid-range ballistic missiles. Furthermore, at the political level, with the election of its Christian ally, Michel Aoun, the organization is likely to remain one of the principal power brokers in Lebanese complex politics.

In the category of non-state actors in the Middle East, Hezbollah has historically had the most advanced military capability, thanks to the support of the Syrian and Iranian regimes. One of Tehran's objectives

is to create replicas of Hezbollah's forces in other countries. It increasingly relies on the 'Party of God' in its influence strategy across the Middle East and the Arabian Peninsula, not only as a proxy insurgency but also as a builder of local militias (in Syria, Iraq and possibly Yemen). Therefore it is critical for the UAE and others in the Gulf to understand the evolution of the organization in terms of capabilities and political agenda.

Against that backdrop, this EDA Insight evaluates the current status of Hezbollah and assesses its potential evolution after the Syrian war. The Insight first looks at the group's involvement in the Syrian conflict since 2011. The second section assesses the evolution of the Hezbollah-Israel conflict. Then it describes the regionalization of Hezbollah's agenda through its footprint outside South Lebanon, from post-2003 Iraq to today's Yemen. In a fourth and last section, it explores two possible scenarios for the evolution of Hezbollah and their implications for regional security.

Why is it Important?

- Containing and degrading Hezbollah's influence will demand a detailed assessment of its resources and strategies. A better understanding of Hezbollah's regional evolution will allow decision makers to adapt diplomatic priorities and counterterrorism policies.
- Historically born to spread the Iranian model in Lebanon through a strategy tailored to the country, Hezbollah is now positioning itself regionally as a self-proclaimed protector of Shia minorities everywhere. In the long run, the latest developments in Iraq and Syria suggest that Iranian Revolutionary Guards could use Hezbollah as a model to emulate in the Gulf, and in particular in Yemen.
- In case a conflict was to reoccur between Israel and Hezbollah, it would likely include the Golan as a battlefield. In other words, both actors would engage in a two-front war, in Lebanon and Syria. Given the complexity of such an environment, it also means that the risks of miscalculation and inadvertent escalation are high.

Hezbollah's War in Syria

Soon after the Syrian uprising started, Hezbollah's Secretary-General, Hassan Nasrallah, and his close advisors declared their full support for the Syrian regime. Notwithstanding the claims of the protesters in Deraa and elsewhere, Nasrallah's speeches in 2011 denounced what he described as the predatory

strategies of external powers directed at Assad's regime. Early on, the Party developed a conspiratorial narrative of the crisis, identical to that presented by the government of Bashar al Assad.

This political support quickly turned into a significant military effort as well. After months of skirmishes in villages bordering Lebanon, Hezbollah fully entered the conflict during the summer of 2012, and more precisely after the 18 July bomb attack in Damascus that killed several key officials of the Syrian security apparatus (among them Syrian Defense Minister Dawoud Rajiha and Deputy Defense Minister Assef Shawkat).

As the regime in Damascus faced a crucial scarcity of manpower due to desertion or defection, Hezbollah and Iranian Pasdarans shored it up by training pro-Assad militias such as the Chabihas and Jeish al Chaa'bi to replace the conventional forces in several parts of the country. The sectarian nature of these new groups soon became central. Around 2012-2013, it became nearly impossible to count the dozens of Shia militias burgeoning in Syria. Some of the most prominent groups were Liwa'a Abou Al Fadl al Abbas, Liwa'a 'Ammar Ibn Yasir, and Kataeb Sayyid al Chuhada. Their ideology and their military structure were heavily influenced by the Hezbollah model, the latter sending advisors to train their militants.²

By the end of 2012, as the conflict escalated, Hezbollah raised the level of its cooperation with Assad's forces and increasingly appeared on the battlefield frontlines. It played an active role in the Deraa and Aleppo regions as well as in the border area between Syria and Lebanon. This military activity reached a new threshold in the so-called Al Qusayr battle in the spring of 2013, during which the 'Party of God' openly sent between 1,200 and 1,700 men, divided in 17 units, to fight on Syrian soil against the rebels.

In Al Qusayr, Hezbollah's offensive started by clearing villages surrounding the town such as Radwaniya and Burhaniya. They then attacked the city from the south and moved north. Fighters were experienced Hezbollah operatives who launched the attacks with small squads of no more than five men. Command of these operations was under the direct responsibility of Hezbollah military cadres, but the combatants used Syrian weapon systems such as T-55 and T-54 tanks, artillery and antimissiles. They even gave orders to the Syrian soldiers backing them. Soon rebel forces retrenched to some northern zones of the city. By the beginning of June, Hezbollah achieved a decisive breakthrough. It first conducted heavy bombardment of remaining rebel positions and then moved forces into the area. Syrian television rapidly announced the reconquest of Al Qusayr as a major victory for the regime.³

In late May, Hassan Nasrallah publicly acknowledged this involvement during one of his speeches commemorating the 13th anniversary of Israel's withdrawal from South Lebanon. He asserted: 'Where we need to be, we will be. Where we began to assume our responsibilities, we will continue to assume our responsibilities. To defeat this very, very dangerous conspiracy [against Syria] we will bear any sacrifices and all the consequences.'⁴ This was the first time Hezbollah publicly admitted its fighters were in combat in Syria.

Al Qusayr was one of many battles that would be fought in this area. A year later, Hezbollah fought alongside the regime forces in the rebel-held village of Yabroud. In a way, these battles are part of a war of attrition between Hezbollah and anti-regime forces - in particular Jabhat al Nusra (Fatah al Sham) - which continues until this day.

Overall, one of the biggest analytical challenges is to measure the impact of the warfighting experience on Hezbollah's forces. It is estimated that the organization has deployed between 3,000 and 5,000 fighters on the ground in Syria. A precise death toll from the fighting is obviously hard to find but estimates range between 800 and 1,200.⁵ This would mean that a third of Hezbollah's fighting force has been killed, which is an extremely high battle death rate. These casualties include key figures from the Party's security apparatus such as Mustafa Badreddine, Samir Kuntar, or Jihad Mughnyeh (son of Imad). If these numbers suggest a heavy price for Hezbollah's involvement in Syria, we should still be mindful of the major operational experience the Party is acquiring through the war in Syria.

At the military level, two key lessons are emerging from Hezbollah's performance in Syria: its capabilities with regard to offensive tactics and its experience of combined operations. First, Hezbollah's way of war in its past confrontations with Israel was a mix of guerrilla tactics and territorial defense. With the Syrian war, there came a new objective: to retake territories lost by the Assad regime which were considered to be key spots for the Syrian-Iranian axis. This is why the battle of Al Qusayr was so critical. As the Syrian regime lost more and more territories between the second part of 2012 and the first part of 2013, it became essential from a pro-regime perspective to disrupt the lines of communication of the rebellion.

This ground assault was closely coordinated with the Iranians as indicated by two trips to Tehran made by Hassan Nasrallah in the weeks prior to the offensive.⁶ But the swift victory also revealed how much the fighting skills of Hezbollah soldiers had improved in the last decade as they were now able to concentrate

small units on one target to control a territory. Hezbollah's campaigns were not always successful: its subsequent offensive on Aleppo in the fall of 2013 failed to push the rebels out of the city. But in the future, its military commanders may be tempted to reiterate these tactics and launch bolder moves in other areas of dispute, outside of Syria, for instance on the Chebaa farms in Lebanon.

At the operational level, Hezbollah's combatants have been involved in complex battles involving the military components (Special Forces, regular army or air force) of two regional players – Iran, Syria – and one global power – Russia. As evidenced by its attainments, this undoubtedly enabled Hezbollah to improve its operational skills. The significance of this multinational experience remains to be cautiously measured, in particular with regards to Hezbollah-Russia exchanges.

Several observers, including retired Israeli military officers, have speculated that Hezbollah had been coordinating its operations closely with Russia and that, as a result, the organization would gain military skills beyond the Syrian battleground that may be a game changer in future conflicts.⁷ It is too early to evaluate the consequences of this Russian-Hezbollah cooperation but undoubtedly the latter is learning Moscow's methods of war, probably exchanging lessons on hybrid warfare, and becoming familiar with advanced Russian weaponry and technologies.⁸ In that context, despite major losses, Hezbollah has gained substantial experience on the Syrian battlefield that could have implications both in Lebanon and more broadly in the Middle East.

The Evolving Lebanese-Israeli Front

How does the Syrian front impact Hezbollah's ability to maintain its traditional level of commitment in Lebanon? So far, contrary to early forecasts that the Party would progressively have to choose between both battlefields, Hezbollah sustained this two-front posture in Syria and Lebanon. In fact, and despite the large number of casualties and concerns within its constituencies, its political and military strength have in some ways increased since the war started.

At the political level, Hezbollah remains one of the central players in Beirut politics, even though the link between the organization and its popular support base might be weakening. Last October, the election of its Christian ally, Michel Aoun, as Lebanon's president, underlined the Party's ability to influence the political process after two years of institutional blockage. Its control over Lebanon's territories in the south and the

Bekaa does not face any serious competitor. In 2013, the aftermath of the anti-Hezbollah clashes that broke out in Saida, led by Sheikh Ahmad al Assir, epitomized the primacy of Hezbollah, at least for the moment.

This does not mean Hezbollah faces no challenge. In recent years, corruption scandals involving Hezbollah cadres and brewing controversies among its members regarding its involvement in Syria have brought into question the link between the organization and its Lebanese constituencies.⁹ Although there is no sign yet of a deep rift, it could well evolve in the near future.

At the military level, Hezbollah and Iran now challenge the balance with Israel in two different ways. First, the Iranians and Hezbollah have been transferring a significant amount of the Syrian missile arsenal to Lebanon. This is less a major shift than the continuation of a policy that started after the 2006 conflict in Lebanon. Back in 2010, it was believed that the Syrian regime supplied the Party with M-600 short-range ballistic missiles, a variant of the Fateh-110, which can carry an 1100-pound warhead and has a range of 210 km.¹⁰

That same year, according to sources quoted by the US Congressional Research Service, Syria had transferred Scud-D ballistic missiles to Hezbollah. With a range of 700 km, Scud-D missiles could reach either Jerusalem or Tel Aviv. Although Syrian authorities denied the charges, the US State Department issued a statement saying 'the United States condemns in the strongest terms the transfer of any arms, and especially ballistic missile systems such as the Scud, from Syria to Hezbollah. (...) The transfer of these arms can only have a destabilizing effect on the region, and would pose an immediate threat to both the security of Israel and the sovereignty of Lebanon.'¹¹ The war in Syria did not disrupt these transfers, and sometimes even accelerated their frequency to safeguard Assad's arsenals from the rebels. As a result, Hezbollah's inventory grew bigger: whereas experts estimated its size to be 40,000 rockets in 2010, by 2016 they were re-evaluating this number up to 100,000.¹²

The second indicator that Hezbollah is challenging the status quo with Israel is the building of a new front on the Golan. Over recent years, it appeared that Hezbollah and the Iranians were not solely fighting Syrian rebels in the Golan, but turning this specific area into a new forward operating base to target Israel. Various reports claim that tunnels and bunkers are being built to prepare for the next conflict with the Israeli military. In October 2015, General Qasem Suleimani, commander of the Quds Force, visited the area to reaffirm its strategic importance before travelling to Beirut to visit the graves of Hezbollah's fighters.

The Israelis reacted in two ways. First they played a rather ambiguous game with Syrian rebels on the other side of the border. Not only were rebels provided with medical care in Israeli hospitals but soon some exchanges took place. By 2014, the United Nations Disengagement Observer Force 'sporadically observed armed members of the opposition interacting with [the] Israeli Defence Force across the ceasefire line in the vicinity of United Nations positions'.¹³ Despite these claims, Israeli officials have constantly denied any collaboration with Syrian groups.

The second Israeli reaction to the new Iran-Hezbollah strategy in the Golan was increased air strikes. The first significant one took place on 30 January 2013, when the Israeli Air Force bombed a convoy in Jamraya, on its way to Lebanon with mid-range ground-air missiles BUK-M2. A few months later, on the 5th of May, the Israelis launched new airstrikes on a facility in the suburbs of Damascus, allegedly storing Fateh 110 missiles. Since then, there has been a steady growth in the frequency and intensity of Israeli raids in Syria, with in January 2015 a helicopter bombing a Hezbollah convoy in the governorate of Quneitra. Seven militiamen died, among them Jihad Mughniyeh, the son of one of the founders of Hezbollah. But soon, journalists discovered that an Iranian brigadier general, Mohammad Ali Allahdadi, also died in the Israeli strike. Hezbollah retaliated 10 days later in the Chebaa farms by shooting one missile at an Israeli patrol, killing two soldiers and injuring seven others.¹⁴

Although further escalation was prevented, these developments have a deeper implication. If a conflict was to reoccur between Israel and Hezbollah, it would likely include the Golan as a battlefield. In other words, both actors would engage in a two-front war, in Lebanon and Syria. Given the complexity of such an environment, it also means that the risks of miscalculation and inadvertent escalation are high. Bearing in mind the current arsenal of Hezbollah, and Israeli traditional reliance on massive airpower as retaliatory measures, any future conflict would cause devastating damages and could quickly spiral out of control.

An Increased Regional Presence

Despite its heavy presence in Lebanon and Syria, Hezbollah has also widened its regional agenda. Since the 1980s, the Party has been involved outside of its Lebanese stronghold. It developed financial networks in Latin America, Europe and Africa and also supported - or directly commanded - terrorist attacks abroad. These attacks were usually targeting Israeli embassies or Jewish cultural centers (in Argentina, Bulgaria, and Cyprus) but they also included Arab

designated enemies. For instance, it recruited and trained militiamen such as Hezbollah al Hijaz, involved in the attacks of the Khobar Towers in Saudi Arabia in 1996.¹⁵

But the regional agenda of Hezbollah really grew in earnest a decade ago. It was the result of both its battlefield performance in 2006 that emboldened its leadership and of Iran's use of the group to execute its assertive strategy in the region. The Party first expanded its activities to Iraq in the aftermath of the US-led invasion, where it trained emerging local Shia militias. In Iraq, starting in 2006, the Al Quds forces put the 'Party of God' in charge of the training of emerging militias such as Kataeb Hezbollah and Asa'ib Ahl al Haq. The man in charge, Ali Mussa Daquduq, was arrested a year later by the American military in Iraq and was said to work under the direct supervision of Youssef Hashim, chief of Hezbollah's special operations.¹⁶

This training role of Hezbollah has continued to expand. In 2014, Hassan Nasrallah claimed that the group was 'ready to sacrifice martyrs in Iraq five times more than what we sacrificed in Syria in order to protect shrines'.¹⁷ This indicated a major shift in Hezbollah's political agenda: historically born to spread the Iranian model in Lebanon through a strategy tailored to the country, it is now acting regionally as a self-proclaimed protector of Shia minorities everywhere.

This new agenda of Hezbollah has a direct implication for the Arabian Peninsula. As Iran's ambitions in the region increased, so did those of Hezbollah. Like its Iranian patrons, the Party had already been involved in the Peninsula in many ways, through the development of intelligence sleeper cells and political and military support to local actors in order to attempt to destabilize Arab monarchies.¹⁸ The war in Syria has exacerbated this phenomenon. Following the condemnation by Gulf States of Assad's treatment of the protesters and the eventual call by Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) members to oust the Syrian leader, Damascus reacted by accusing the Gulf States of being behind a vast conspiracy against his regime.

The evolution of Hezbollah's rhetoric reflected this trend. Starting in late 2011, it included more and more attacks against Gulf countries, in particular Saudi Arabia and Qatar. In his speeches, Nasrallah would regularly accuse Riyadh of promoting extremism and supporting takfiri groups. Like the Assad regime, Hezbollah would spread the conspiracy narrative about a Syrian conflict orchestrated by Gulf countries alongside the US and Israel.

Although Hezbollah was - and has been for a long time - promoting a sectarian agenda, both in Lebanon

and elsewhere, it has been putting the blame for the intercommunal conflicts on rival Arab states. This confrontational rhetoric escalated a bit further after Saudi Arabia's execution in January 2016 of Sheikh Nimr Al Nimr, a Shia cleric who had called for the demise of the Saudi regime. The execution led to an attack on the Saudi Embassy and consulates in Iran. Meanwhile, Nasrallah declared that this act had revealed the face of Saudi Arabia as a 'tyrannical, oppressive, criminal and takfiri regime'.¹⁹

Hezbollah's activity in the Gulf was not limited to a war of words. For years, the group had been preparing attacks in the Peninsula and gathering intelligence on the local security apparatuses. In January 2016, Bahraini authorities announced the arrest of six members of a cell tied to the 'Party of God'. Sleeper cells involved in counterintelligence and arms smuggling were also dismantled in Kuwait and the UAE.²⁰ In June, the Special Criminal Court in Saudi Arabia also reported the existence of a terrorist cell linked to Hezbollah in the Qatif region. Additionally, according to experts, Hezbollah has been involved in Yemen alongside Iranian operatives, providing military support to the Houthi insurgents. Hezbollah's presence in the country, they claim, started before the war, as operatives like Khalil Harb and Abu Ali Tabtabai had been reportedly travelling there in past years.²¹

In the context of the increased tensions between Iran and Saudi Arabia, the Coalition's intervention to restore legitimacy in Yemen was publicly condemned by Hezbollah. Its Deputy Secretary-General, Naim Qassem, went as far as to say in April 2015, that Saudi Arabia would 'incur very serious losses' and 'pay a heavy price'.²² In October, Hassan Nasrallah even claimed that 'the Saud family will be defeated in Yemen'.²³

As of today, the exact level of Hezbollah involvement inside Yemen is hard to measure but most of the observers agree that it is likely to be far less significant than in Iraq and Syria.²⁴ However, Hezbollah may have provided Houthis with important lessons on guerilla warfare and missile employment. According to open sources, the anti-ship missile used by the Houthis in the Red Sea last October and which struck a UAE vessel was a Chinese-made C-802, the same type that Hezbollah had used against the Israeli navy during the 2006 conflict.²⁵ Although it was undoubtedly delivered by Iran, there are some indications that the 'Party of God' may have played a role as trainer.²⁶ Some sources even go as far as to suggest that Hezbollah combatants may be the ones launching the missiles.²⁷ Likewise, a widely circulated video in the spring of 2016 showed Hezbollah commander Abu Saleh meeting with Houthi fighters and discussing the planning of operations inside Saudi Arabia.²⁸

All in all, there have been various reports suggesting that Hezbollah had been on the battlefield along the Houthis but contrary to its intervention in Syria, Hezbollah consistently denied the accusations regarding its presence in Yemen. In the long term, these latest developments suggest that Iranian Revolutionary Guards could use Hezbollah as a model to emulate in the Gulf, and in particular in Yemen, where the Houthis would represent a convenient candidate for a local proxy. This evolution would be consistent with the history of Iran and Hezbollah interventions from Lebanon to Iraq.

Scenarios for the Future

As the previous sections show, Hezbollah's regional interventions are today at an unprecedented level. From its enduring deterrence posture in Lebanon vis-à-vis Israel to its involvement in Syria, Iraq and the Gulf, the group has turned into a small but significant player in Middle Eastern conflicts. However, it is far from certain that this role will remain unchallenged in coming years. Below, two scenarios are offered to discuss the Party's future. Their value is more heuristic than predictive, meaning that they aim to emphasize some key drivers of Hezbollah's evolution for the discussion (its exit strategy in Syria, its control over the Lebanese front, the relation with Iranian Revolutionary Guards) rather than to forecast a certain course of events. As of today, the current course of events would see the Party evolving somewhere between these two scenarios.

Scenario #1: Hezbollah overstretched

In this scenario, Hezbollah sees its political and military strength decreasing over the coming years. The conflict in Syria generates such losses that the group would reach a critically weak level. The military fatigue from Hezbollah combatants who have been on the Syrian battleground for several years triggers internal discontent among the ranks, with increased frustration and soul-searching discussions on the legitimacy of their intervention.

This combines with a challenging situation on the Lebanese front. The recent cases of corruption have shed light on the modern nature of Hezbollah, a Party that is now so ingrained into Lebanese politics that it created a clique of politicians and operatives disconnected from the Lebanese Shia constituency.

Hezbollah also sees its power shrinking as a result of the international sanctions aimed at its wealth. Over recent years, both the European Union and the GCC changed their policies by declaring the group a terrorist organization and by targeting international assets likely to be used by Hezbollah for its military activities.

All in all, in this scenario Hezbollah finds itself unable to sustain its current level of effort: it has to retreat from Syria in order to preserve its positions in Lebanon but this happens too late to avoid a confrontation, either with Lebanese competitors or with Israeli military.

Scenario # 2: Hezbollah's assertive strategy in the Middle East

Another possible course of events is a scenario under which Hezbollah does not suffer excessively from the war effort in Syria. Hezbollah alongside Iran and the Assad regime use the exhaustion and frustration of Western powers following the failed diplomatic initiatives to hold their positions and inflict a severe blow to the remnants of the Syrian rebellion.

Galvanized by this momentum, the 'Party of God' leverages its know-how acquired in the Syrian theater in other places. It consolidates its central role in the execution of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards' agenda for the Middle East. Hezbollah is the operator for Tehran in emulating its political-military model in the region, with a priority given to Yemen, where the Iranians try to reproduce the Lebanese experience from the 1980s.

Meanwhile, this regional ambition does not jeopardize Hezbollah's grip on Lebanon, where it uses its influence on the new presidency to defuse any challenge from political foes. At the military level, its arsenal and the warfighting experience of its combatants further widen the gap with the weak Lebanese Armed Forces. The UN Interim Forces in Lebanon (UNIFIL), already facing difficulties fulfilling its mandate, is losing its ability to hold its positions in South Lebanon while on the other side of the border, Israelis prepare for a new military campaign.

Potential Policy Implications

In this perspective, some important issues for policymakers are worth exploring as their outcome could well lead to one scenario or another:

- *How is Hezbollah preparing itself for the day after the Syrian war?*
- *As Hezbollah's military skills and political clout develop, how will this affect its patronage relation with Iran?*
- *How long is the Party able to contain sectarian escalation in Lebanon?*
- *How to build a strong and reliable Lebanese security alternative to Hezbollah?*

These critical questions - or known unknowns - are likely to affect the regional security environment in coming years. In all likelihood, Hezbollah will continue to play a big, if not bigger, role in the Middle East. Containing and degrading its influence will demand a detailed appraisal of its resources and strategies. As indicated by the war in Syria, the Party's agenda has significantly evolved over the last five years, requiring us to refine our assessments. Eventually, a better understanding of Hezbollah's regional evolution will allow decision makers to adapt diplomatic priorities and counterterrorism policies.

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