

CSAG INFORMATION PAPER:

Hezbollah - IRGC Main Coordinating Tool in Middle East

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1. Subject: Hezbollah - IRGC's main coordinating tool in the Middle East.

2. Purpose:

This paper aims to present the results of the CSAG's analysis of Hezbollah as the main coordinator for Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) actions in the ME. It highlights Hezbollah's regional activities, cooperation/coordination within ITN and the possible implications for the US/CENTCOM. This paper is the first of a series on Hezbollah's role in the ME and worldwide.

3. Origins:

Lebanese Hezbollah (the "Party of God") was founded in 1982 by coalescence, under Iran's influence, of several Lebanese groups of young Shi'a militants. Members of IRGC were sent to Lebanon to help Hezbollah recruits, provide political and religious indoctrination and military training, including instruction in terrorist tactics.¹

Hezbollah's main goals have included resisting Israeli occupation of Lebanese territory, contesting and, ultimately, seeking to eliminate Israel's very existence; promoting the standing of Shi'a communities worldwide and undermining Arab states with Shi'a minorities to export the Iranian Shi'a revolution. According to a RAND study on ITN, published in 2021, Hezbollah's role was more peripheral in the Network.² However, since the report was published, Hezbollah's role shifted towards the center of ITN efforts to support and coordinate various regional groups, to complement IRGC objectives in the region.

Iran supported Hezbollah's ascension, seeing it as a way of meddling with regional countries' internal affairs, while maintaining "plausible deniability".³

4. Assessment:

While the initial scope of Hezbollah was to tackle the problems faced by Lebanese people, Iran used the opportunity to expand their regional influence. Since its creation until early 2000's, Hezbollah managed to take control of a significant part of Lebanon's political power and resources, thereby achieving most of their internal goals (stable political position, gaining public support by providing services). This created the base for them, prompted by Iran's agenda, to intensify their activities outside Lebanon's borders.

a. Hezbollah going regional

The changes in their structure and their plans in support of Iran's interests in Iraq, Syria, and Yemen, indicated a significant organizational shift of their priorities from Israel towards the region. Most evident was the assignment of key personnel, top commanders from Hezbollah's Southern Command to the group's new regional missions at Iran's behest.⁴

Hezbollah's role as a regional actor did not start with its deployment to Syria. It was present in Iraq even earlier, "but it became more obvious and more structured in Syria."⁵ In addition, a Saudi air strike reportedly killed Hezbollah commander Mustafa al Gharawi, in Yemen.⁶

During this period Gen. Soleimani, IRGC-QF commander, effectively assumed leadership position over Hezbollah's fighting forces, often at the expense of the group's own commanders,⁷ as he mentioned in a 2008 message addressed to Gen. David Petraeus: "*Dear General Petraeus: You should be aware that I, Qassem Soleimani, control Iran's policy for Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Gaza, and Afghanistan.*"⁸

b. Hezbollah taking leading responsibilities for ITN operations

General Soleimani's assassination in January 2020 brought to light a Hezbollah-based structure which was assigned with prominent positions in coordinating the activities of a broad network of Shi'a militant proxies — the "Resistance Axis", designated to continue and improve the ITN actions — on behalf of Iran's IRGC-QF.⁹

Considering that, in practice, achieving the goals regarding the demise of Israel proved to be out of reach if acting in a direct manner, extending their actions abroad empowered Hezbollah to indirectly influence regional situations by gaining access to more resources. This provided a wider recruitment base, prestige (and more freedom of action), spreading of Shi'a ideology, built-up support against Israel, and destabilization of "non-cooperative" neighboring regimes, while at the same time supporting Iran's regional agenda, for which they are awarded annually with \$700 m – \$1 b.¹⁰

c. Advanced training regimen for other Shi'a militias aligned with Iran

Hezbollah formed a designated unit (Unit 3800 in IRQ) to meet the training and advisory needs of Iraqi militia groups. It could be said that this model mirrors the method used by Coalition Forces in AFG to train ANA (similar modus operandi). However, the main difference resides in the desired objectives to achieve. Hezbollah is using Shi'a ideology (Velayat-e Faqih), supported by clerics educated and trained in Iran, arguably in a better manner than the Coalition Forces did it in Afghanistan.

The group also runs disinformation boot camps in Lebanon for the purpose of building up the "electronic armies" of Iran's proxy groups around the region. Students from the region were among the thousands of "Iran-backed social media activists" who attended the 10-day courses, which were taught by Hezbollah specialists.¹¹ The purpose of this training is to create disinformation networks of influence but also a base for future cyber operations. It could be likened to PsyOps aimed toward the regional population.

Similar models that were applied by IRGC in Lebanon during formation of Hezbollah, can be found now, evolved, being used by Hezbollah in the region.

5. Conclusion:

Hezbollah's center of gravity is shifting, at least geographically, from being a militia primarily focused on activities in Lebanon and opposition to Israel, to a regional actor. The main reason for the shift was the improvement of Hezbollah capabilities and a significant level of mutual trust between Iranian and Hezbollah leadership. That provided opportunity for Hezbollah to fill some of the prominent positions in the Iranian threat network, while spreading Shi'a influence in the region.

Regional activities are the priority for Hezbollah leadership and are giving them the leverage to create a more connected personal network (a network inside a network). Possible ways to tackle networks are to target/disrupt the center or try to cut its connections. This is achievable by directly targeting Hezbollah or isolating their efforts of reaching to the other groups.

6. **Recommendations for USCENTCOM:**

- a. Considering ideology and material resources as lifelines of Hezbollah, identify proper ways to counter their propaganda and to cut them off from their material resources. Disrupting financial resources will be instrumental in reducing the footprint of their actions in USCENTCOM AOR.
- b. Support regional countries who conduct targeting efforts against Hezbollah activities in the AOR.
- c. Supporting other political options in Lebanon that might weaken the position of Hezbollah and their allies in the government.
- d. Exploit and widen the ideology gaps, especially the Iranian concept of Velayat-e Faqih, by which the Ayatollah is imposed as the only supreme spiritual leader of Shi'a community.
- e. In coordination with the use of social media, start a campaign about the danger of disinformation in the region.
- f. Focus an Info Ops campaign to illuminate the Hezbollah focus having moved from Lebanese population needs into regional efforts to support Iranian strategic objectives.

¹ Mathew Levitt, "Hezbollah's regional activities in support or Iran's proxy networks," The Middle East Institute, July 2021, page 5. <https://www.mei.edu/publications/hezbollahs-regional-activities-support-irans-proxy-networks>, (Accessed January 15, 2023)

² Ariane M. Tabatabai, Jeffrey Martini, Becca Wasser, "The Iran Threat Network (ITN), Four Models of Iran's Nonstate Client Partnerships", Rand Corporation, 2021, https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR4231.html, (Accessed January 15, 2023)

³ Mathew Levitt, "Hezbollah's regional activities in support or Iran's proxy networks," The Middle East Institute, July 2021, page 9. <https://www.mei.edu/publications/hezbollahs-regional-activities-support-irans-proxy-networks>, (Accessed January 15, 2023)

⁴ Mathew Levitt, "Hezbollah's regional activities in support or Iran's proxy networks," The Middle East Institute, July 2021, page 10. <https://www.mei.edu/publications/hezbollahs-regional-activities-support-irans-proxy-networks>, (Accessed January 15, 2023)

⁵ Mathew Levitt, "Hezbollah's regional activities in support or Iran's proxy networks," The Middle East Institute, July 2021, page 19. <https://www.mei.edu/publications/hezbollahs-regional-activities-support-irans-proxy-networks>, (Accessed January 15, 2023)

⁶ Ali Mahmoud, "Saudi Arabia-led coalition air strike kills high ranking Hezbollah commander, says Yemeni official," The National, May 25, 2021. <https://www.thenationalnews.com/gulf-news/saudi-arabia-led-coalition-air-strike-kills-high-rankinghezbollah-commander-says-yemeni-official>. (Accessed January 15, 2023)

⁷ Mathew Levitt, "Hezbollah's regional activities in support or Iran's proxy networks," The Middle East Institute, July 2021, page 5. <https://www.mei.edu/publications/hezbollahs-regional-activities-support-irans-proxy-networks>, (Accessed January 15, 2023)

⁸ Martin Chulov, "Qassem Suleimani: the Iranian general 'secretly running' Iraq", The Guardian, July 2011, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2011/jul/28/qassem-suleimani-iran-iraq-influence>, (Accessed January 15, 2023)

⁹ Ibid

¹⁰ Dan Williams, "Top Israeli general sees increased Iran spending on foreign wars," Reuters, January 2, 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-iran-rallies-israel/top-israeli-general-seesincreased-iran-spending-on-foreign-wars-idUSKBN1ER0Q9>. (Accessed January 15, 2023)

¹¹ Wil Crisp and Suadad al-Salhy, "Inside Hizbollah's Fake News Training Camps Sowing Instability Across the Middle East," The Telegraph, August 2, 2020, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2020/08/02/exclusive-inside-hezbollahs-fakenewstraining-camps-sowing/>, (Accessed January 15, 2023)