Lebanon's Hizbollah and the Syria Conflict

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Table of Contents

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I. Introduction

Hizbollah's full-fledged military intervention in Syria surprised many observers across the political spectrum.[2] As late as May 2012, a senior Hizbollah official asserted, "We did not, and we will not fight in Syria".[3] Prior to its overt involvement in the battle for Qusayr in 2013, the Shiite movement had regularly criticised Sunni Lebanese groups for fighting on behalf of the Syrian opposition and denounced the flow of arms and fighters across the border as a threat to Lebanon's stability.[4]

As military pressure on President Bashar Assad's regime intensified in the course of 2012, Hizbollah's role evolved. What began as political support for a government that had been a crucial ally in the group's occasional confrontations with Israel[5] increasingly took the form of military assistance. By mid-2012, claims had surfaced (albeit mainly from the group's opponents) that Hizbollah was providing technical and logistical support to Damascus and that it was helping some of Syria's Shiite communities develop self-defence militias.[6] As reports of Hizbollah casualties mounted,[7] Hassan Nasrallah, the movement's secretary general, acknowledged in October 2012 that it was playing a role in Syria. He insisted, however, that this was restricted to helping Lebanese Shiites, living on the Syrian side of the border, protect their villages and families against rebels and denied broader involvement: "Until this moment, we have not fought in Syria and [Assad's] regime has not asked us to do so".[8]

Whatever the truth of these claims and counter-claims, Hizbollah crossed a significant threshold the following year. Rumours that the group was playing a major role on the frontlines built throughout the spring; in May 2013, it for the first time publicly acknowledged dispatching fighters to Syria, as it spearheaded an assault against Syrian rebels in the border town of Qusayr. In February 2014, it sent its troops to the town of Yabroud, in the Qalamoun Mountains north of Damascus. While individual battles like Yabroud and Qusayr have received the most attention, the U.S. claims to have tracked the movement deploy-

[1] * Plusec-Pluralism, Human Security and Sustainability Centre/Plusec-Centre de pluralism de la sécurité humanine et du développement durable (Plusec) retained the International Crisis Group to conduct this research and analysis and to prepare this report.

[2] This was true of Lebanon's two rival political camps: the Saudi and Western-backed March 14 alliance, led by the Future Current, and the Hizbollah-led March 8 alliance. Crisis Group interviews, Beirut, October-November 2013. A senior U.S. diplomat said, "I admit that neither we nor our intelligence services imagined that Hizbollah would send thousands of fighters into Syria". Crisis Group interview, Washington, November 2013.

[3] *al-Nashra,* 27 May 2012.

[4] "Nasrallah accuses March 14 of arming Syrian opposition", *The Daily Star,* 16 February 2012. See also Crisis Group Middle East Report N°132, *A Precarious Balancing Act: Lebanon and the Syrian Conflict,* 22 November 2012, pp. 13-16.

[5] In May 2011, Hassan Nasrallah, Hizbollah's secretary general, said, "the fall of the Syrian regime is an Israeli-U.S. interest, aiming at getting Syria to sign any peace deal with Israel .... As a resistance movement against Israel, we are required to adopt a responsible stance that is committed to the security and stability of Syria as a government and people". Al-Manar, 25 May 2011. In March 2012, he asserted: "The most important weapons with which we fought Israel during the [2006] July war came from Syria". Al-Manar, 15 March 2012.

[6] The U.S. accused Hizbollah of providing a "range of activity, including logistical support, operational support, to the Syrian Government in its violent crackdown". www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2012/08/ 196335.htm. "Iran and H[i]zbollah build militia networks in Syria in event that Assad falls, officials say", *The Washington Post*, 10 February 2013.

[7] "H[i]zbollah increases support for Syrian regime, U.S. and Lebanese officials say", *The Washington Post*, 26 September 2012; "H[i]zbollah role in Syria grows more evident", *The Daily Star,* 12 October 2012; "H[i]zbollah commander, fighters killed in Syria", *The Washington Post*, 2 October 2012; "Are H[i]zbollah's mysterious 'martyrs' dying in Syria?", France 24, 1 October 2012.

[8] See Nasrallah's speech on *al-Manar*, 11 October 2012.

ing fighters across the country, in particular in Deraa, Aleppo and Idlib, in addition to Damascus and its suburbs.[9]

The full extent of Hizbollah's actions in Syria is unclear and probably will remain so. What is clear is the message the Shiite party sent by taking credit for the Qusayr victory: that it will spare no effort to back its ally and defeat those it considers enemies. Joining the war paved the way for an ever more aggressive approach – and an increased risk of retaliation by its Syrian and Lebanese opponents.

II. Hizbollah's Perspective

Hizbollah's forceful military involvement was a logical extension of its steadfast support, since 2005, for President Assad. From its perspective, intervention became a "strategic necessity" in July 2012, when the regime's survival seemed jeopardised; persuading Hizbollah's constituency that participation in the Syria conflict was a "necessary evil" proved relatively easy, indicating effective preparation.[10] The movement highlighted the growing threat to Lebanese Shiites' well-being and safety from radical Sunni militants across the border and so the need to shift from moral to military support. The message that Syria's Sunni rebels were an existential threat not only to the so-called axis of resistance against Israel (Hizbollah, Iran and the Syrian regime),[11] but also to Lebanese Shiites resonated with Hizbollah's supporters.

A. *Hizbollah's Narrative*

Hizbollah's narrative about the conflict has kept the Shiite community onside, though it also has contributed to escalating sectarianism, turning the movement's dire warnings about bloodthirsty Sunni extremists into a self-fulfilling prophecy. Hizbollah did not oppose the Arab uprisings when they began in 2011. When the protests, sparked in Tunisia, swept across Egypt, Libya and Bahrain, Hizbollah welcomed them as "liberation revolutions"[12]. However when the unrest reached Syria in March 2011, it adopted a different stance. Nasrallah distinguished the case by underscoring Damascus's vital role in the axis of resistance -- an attempt to boost the regime's dwindling legitimacy by portraying the unrest as part of a broader campaign by Israel's supporters rather than as a popular uprising.[13]

In July 2012, Nasrallah said the U.S. had "taken advantage of rightful demands of the Syrian people, prevented dialogue and turned Syria into a war zone because the objective is destroying and fragmenting Syria, like they did in Iraq".[14] A year later, he developed this theme further:

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[9] Crisis Group interviews, Syrian activists, U.S. officials, Beirut, Washington, October-November 2013. A senior U.S. diplomat said, "we now have intelligence showing Hizbollah and Iraqi volunteers fighting in Deraa, Idlib, and in and around Aleppo". Crisis Group interview, Washington, November 2013. See also, "4,000 H[i]zbollah fighters reach rebel-held Aleppo: FSA", *The Daily Star,* 6 June 2013; "FSA chief: After Qusayr, H[i]zbollah fighters reach Idlib and Aleppo", Al Arabiya, 26 April 2013.

[10] Crisis Group interview, Hizbollah official, Beirut, October 2013.

[11] Previously, the Palestinian movement Hamas was part of the axis of resistance, but its support for the Syrian opposition estranged it from its former allies. See below and Crisis Group Middle East Report N°149, *The Next Round in Gaza,* 25 March 2014, pp. 4, 9.

[12] See Nasrallah's speech on al-Manar, 19 March 2011. He addressed the Egyptians demonstrating against former President Hosni Mubarak: "You are waging the war of Arab dignity. Today, with your voices, blood and steadfastness, you are retrieving the dignity of the Arab people; the dignity which was humiliated by some rulers of the Arab world for decades". Press TV, 7 February 2011.

[13] Nasrallah said, "Syria was not only a passageway for the resistance, but also a real military supporter of the resistance. For example, the most important missiles that were falling on Haifa and central Israel [in 2006] were Syrian missiles, offered by Syria to the resistance". Naharnet, 18 July 2012.

[14] Naharnet, 18 July 2012.

> The whole war on Bashar al-Assad is because of his backing of the resistance .... Syria is the backbone of the resistance ... and the resistance cannot stand if [Syria] is broken .... A new phase has begun to support and protect the resistance and Lebanon, and this is everyone's responsibility.[15]

Gradually, in Hizbollah's rhetoric, supporting Assad's regime became tantamount to preserving the movement and, by extension, the well-being of Shiites themselves. The community closed ranks; even those who, in significant numbers, previously had criticised the regime, began to see its downfall as an existential threat. One such former critic -- a journalist who had voiced displeasure with Hizbollah -- drew a comparison with the 2006 war, during which Israel bombed Shiite areas of Lebanon:

> Who are the backers of the Syrian opposition? They are [the Saudi and Western-backed] March 14 alliance, the U.S., France, Saudi Arabia. They all belong to the camp that plotted against us in 2006. Even if I don't like Assad, I find no choice but to support this regime.[16]

Assad's foes have in turn helped Nasrallah make his case by linking the Syrian president's ouster with Hizbollah's downfall.[17]

The movement's strategy rallied its base, but not without cost. It jeopardised relations with important segments of Syrian society – especially the Sunni lower and middle classes -- that formerly had supported Hizbollah and further antagonised other Lebanese constituencies that saw in its stance support for a brutal regime.[18]

The party's self-serving depiction of the opposition as dominated by Sunni extremists and Shiite-haters emanated in part from its inadequate understanding of Syria outside of regime circles: "Hizbollah officials [had] acquired neither deep knowledge of, nor close ties to Syrian society, focusing instead on security and political cooperation with the regime".[19] Its relative distance made it easier for the movement to formulate a narrative rooted in its own ethos and based on its own interests, as opposed to a more nuanced account of the opposition's complex nature.

The deeper the movement's involvement in Syria, the graver and more direct the threats – many of which since have come to pass -- it has invoked as justification. Hizbollah began by talking about the self-defence needs of Lebanese Shiite villagers on the Syrian side of the border;[20] later, it highlighted the necessity of protecting Shiite shrines;[21] ultimately, it advocated a pre-emptive war against *takfiris*,[22] the term it uses to denote Sunni jihadis, thus conjuring up memories of al-Qaeda's slaughter of Shiites in Iraq:

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[15] *The Daily Star*, 25 May 2013.

[16] Crisis Group interview, Beirut, November 2013.

[17] A senior Future Current official said, "the Syrian uprising is the best thing that could happen to Lebanon. It is only a matter of time before Hizbollah is weakened and it is compelled to relinquish its arsenal". Crisis Group interview, Beirut, December 2011. Crisis Group Report, *A Precarious Balancing Act*, op.cit., pp. 20-21; "Barak says Assad's departure 'major blow' to Hizbullah", Naharnet, 17 May 2013; "Iran's Achilles' Heel", *The New York Times*, 7 February 2012. Hizbollah officials appear convinced that the regime's backing for their movement was a prime motivation for the attempt to topple it: "Were Assad to halt its support to Hizbollah today, no one would call for regime change. The ultimate goal of the war on Syria is to break Hizbollah and Iran". Crisis Group interview, Beirut, October 2013.

[18] Crisis Group interviews, Syrian activists and journalists, Beirut, Tripoli, Akkar, September-December 2011.

[19] Crisis Group Report, *A Precarious Balancing Act*, op. cit., p.10

[20] Nasrallah said, "there are more than two dozen villages and farms located just inside Syria, north of the border with Lebanon, that are home to around 30,000 Lebanese, many of whom are Shiites and members of H[i]zbollah .... The residents of these towns took the decision to stay and defend themselves against [Syrian] armed groups and did not engage in battle between the regime and the opposition". Quoted in *The Christian Science Monitor*, 15 October 2012.

[21] Religious shrines have powerful symbolic significance in Shiite culture. The Damascus shrine to Sayyida Zeinab, the daughter of Ali and granddaughter of Muhammad, was a particularly popular destination for young Shiites from Lebanon and the region as a whole. Hizbollah presented the defence of shrines as prevention of further sectarian strife. In Nasrallah's words, "the destruction of the Sayyida Zeinab shrine could have led to a sectarian war in the region. We sent 40 to 50 fighters to [protect it]. "Nasrallah's December 3 interview on OTV", *Now*, 3 December 2013. A party official said, "by defending the Sayyida Zeinab shrine, Hizbollah helped prevent broader and more dangerous discord and killing among Sunnis and Shiites. Shrines are important in the Shiite conscience, and the impact of their destruction should not be underestimated. A striking

> We consider that these groups gaining control over Syria or some specific Syrian provinces, especially those close to the Lebanese borders, are a great danger to Lebanon .... [They are] a great danger to Lebanon, the Lebanese people, the Lebanese state, and coexistence in Lebanon ... to Muslims and Christians [and] to Sunnis first [as *takfiris* tend to turn against their kin]. Do you want evidence? Look to Iraq.[23]

The Shiite movement presented its intervention in Syria as a means of preventing the spread of jihadis into Lebanon: "If we didn't fight in Syria, we would now be fighting in Lebanon".[24] When violent attacks against Hizbollah and the Shiite community escalated,[25] they were seen not as the outcome of the movement joining the Syrian fray, but rather as proof of its wisdom in doing so, a taste of the far greater bloodshed Lebanon would have suffered had Hizbollah not preemptively taken the fight to its enemy. Nasrallah put it bluntly: "If we withdraw from Syria, then [the Syrian towns of] Qusayr, Qalamoun and the Lebanese border would fall in the hands of the armed groups. Car bombs will target all of Lebanon, not only Dahiyeh".[26]

The language used by Hizbollah to describe the Syrian conflict mirrors that of its foes. While it invokes the spectacle of the bloodthirsty *takfiris* to justify its actions, its enemies mobilise their constituencies by painting Hizbollah as a sectarian, savage and inhumane party.[27] Indeed, the *takfiri* slur has proved to be a double-edged sword for Hizbollah, serving not only to rally its supporters but also, as part of an escalatory dynamic, to motivate its opponents and exacerbate sectarianism among the Syrian armed opposition. By 2013, such rhetoric had become the principal means through which both sides legitimised their actions, de-humanised their opponents and appealed to their bases amid a marked intensification of violence.

B. *Deeper and Deeper*

Hizbollah's military involvement chiefly reflects the party's changing assessment of the power balance in Syria. From the start, its top priority has been to ensure the regime's survival, which, in mid-2012, no longer appeared certain. Damascus's failure to contain the uprising -- indeed, its use of tactics that fuelled it -- altered Hizbollah's initial assumption that the regime quickly would regain control of the country and isolate islands of opposition.[28] With rebels approaching the capital, controlling swathes of the north and, for over a year, repelling sustained regime efforts to dislodge them from Homs and its surroundings, a senior Hizbollah official said:

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example is the Iraqi carnage that followed the [2006] destruction of shrines in Samarra". Crisis Group interview, Beirut, October 2013.

[22] Islamists who denounce others as infidels or impious.

[23] Al-Manar, 25 May 2013.

[24] Crisis Group interview, Hizbollah official, Beirut, November 2013.

[25] Since May 2013, Hizbollah checkpoints and convoys and predominantly Shiite neighbourhoods have been targeted by rockets, car bombs and ambushes, killing dozens of Shiites. On 19 November 2013, a double suicide bombing struck the Iranian embassy in Beirut, killing 25, including a diplomat. "Rockets hit Beirut's Dahiyeh", and "17 indicted for launching rockets at Baabda, Dahiyeh", *Now,* 26 May, 28 October 2013; "Dozens killed in the wake of the Dahiyeh explosion – Lebanese Red Cross", LBCI, 15 August 2013; Al-Manar, 2 and 21 January 2013; *Al-Akhbar*, 2 February 2014.

[26] "Nasrallah's 3 December interview on OTV", op. cit. Dahiyeh ("suburb"), designates the southern fringe of Beirut, considered Hizbollah's headquarters and where it enjoys wide popular support.

[27] Crisis Group interviews, Syrians activists and refugees, Lebanese clerics and salafists, Beirut, Tripoli, Saida, Arsal, Akkar, 2011-2013.

[28] Crisis Group Middle East Report N°128, *Syria's Mutating Conflict,* 1 August 2012. In December 2011, a senior Hizbollah official said, "the Syrian regime is still strong. Assad will consolidate its power. He will regain control of Syria even as some islands of insecurity remain in peripheral areas". Crisis Group interview, Beirut, December 2011.

> After the July 2012 bombing [that killed four senior security officials in the heart of Damascus] and subsequent rebel assault on Damascus, the regime began to slide. It faced the very real possibility of losing the capital, which would have amounted to its fall.[29]

Moreover, by 2013 the flow of foreign fighters into the armed opposition and the resulting increase in sectarian sentiment had become a concern.[30] Hardline Islamists took control of crucial areas along the Lebanese border, notably in the rebel supply hubs of Qusayr and Qalamoun. They threatened to sever Hizbollah's Hermel stronghold in north-east Lebanon from its Syrian hinterland and, equally alarmingly, to connect Syrian rebels with sympathetic forces in Lebanon's north as well as its eastern town of Arsal. Meanwhile, the strength of Sunni Islamists in Syria emboldened their Lebanese counterparts;[31] cross-border cooperation came to constitute a genuine long-term threat to Hizbollah.

Further complicating the movement' s position was Qatari and Saudi sponsorship of the opposition. Gulf involvement raised the stakes for both Iran and Hizbollah, for whom the fall of the Syrian regime would have meant not only the loss of a strategic ally but also a disadvantageous recalibration of the regional power balance. By the end of 2013, the regional sponsors of the Syrian conflict were locked in a self-perpetuating cycle of confrontation. As an Hizbollah official put it:

> As the Syrian conflict became ever more regionalised and internationalised, Hizbollah could not have stood on the sidelines. The involvement of March 14, Islamists, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Qatar, the U.S. and France posed a direct threat to us and to Iran. Not only could it have led to Assad's fall, but it also could have guaranteed that any future Syrian regime would have been under the influence of forces fundamentally hostile to the resistance axis.[32]

A journalist with close ties to the movement went further:

> Were Assad's regime to have fallen, Hizbollah would have been next in line. It would have become fully exposed, defenceless vis-à-vis its Lebanese foes and their regional backers, but also vis-à-vis Israel insofar as it would have lost its main weapons supply line. And, across the border, it would have faced hostile forces awaiting the right moment to pounce.[33]

C. *Assessing Gains and Losses*

Militarily, Hizbollah's offensives in the Damascus suburbs[34], Qusayr in June 2013 and the Qalamoun mountains in March 2014 were successful. These campaigns, particularly in Qusayr, also paid symbolic

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[29] Crisis Group interview, Beirut, December 2013.

[30] Accurate estimates of foreign fighters in Syria are difficult to obtain. The International Center for the Study of Radicalisation estimated that, to December 2013, as many as 11,000 from more than 70 countries, Arab and European in particular, had joined rebel ranks. www.icsr.info/2013/12/icsr-insight-11000-foreign-fighters-syria-steep-rise-among-western-europeans/.

[31] See Crisis Group Middle East Reports, *A Precarious Balancing Act,* op. cit.*;* and N° 141, *Too Close for Comfort: Syrians in Lebanon,* 13 May 2013.

[32] Crisis Group interview, Beirut, November 2013.

[33] Crisis Group interview, Beirut, December 2013.

[34] According to Syrian militants and activists, Hizballah has dispatched fighters to the Sayyida Zeinab shrine south of the capital since mid-2012. In 2013-2014, it helped the regime recapture several Damascus suburbs. In December 2013, Nasrallah acknowledged Hizbollah's presence in the capital. "Nasrallah's December 3 interview on OTV", op. cit.; Crisis Group interviews, Syrian militants and activists, Beirut, 2013; "H[i]zbollah, Iraqi militia capture Damascus suburb: opposition", Reuters, 9 October 2013; "Syrian army recaptures two Damascus suburbs from rebels", *The Independent,* 11 October 2013; "Hizbollah in Syria", Institute for the Study of War, Middle East Security Report no. 19, April 2014, pp. 18-21; "Syria army, Hizb[o]llah advance in key Damascus town amid deal for retreat of rebels from C. Homs", Naharnet, 4 May 2014

and psychological dividends, in spite of the significant human losses.[35] Though Hizbollah may have exaggerated Qusayr's strategic value,[36] the victory handed the regime a much-needed achievement. A senior Hizbollah official claimed, with some justification: "Our entry into Qusayr led to an important boost in morale among regime forces".[37]

At home, victory was followed by street celebrations.[38] The successful offensive burnished the movement's image and credentials, mitigating scepticism among its base about the wisdom of Hizbollah's choices and Assad's staying power. For most Shiites, Qusayr demonstrated that they were not only winning battles but were also on the right strategic track. A Hizbollah supporter said, "when the Syrian regime appeared weak, I had doubts. But, once again, Hassan Nasrallah didn't mislead us. Everything he said proved correct. The victory he promised, just like last time [in the 2006 war against Israel], became a reality".[39] The movement's leadership cultivated a triumphalist spirit that its members, as well as sympathetic journalists and analysts, projected in the media.[40]

Even as Hizbollah celebrated Qusayr, it continued to play down allegations that its forces were active in Aleppo and elsewhere in Syria. In December 2013, Hassan Nasrallah said, "Syrians are fighting in Syria; we are not fighting on their behalf. We have no fighters in Deraa, Sweida, Raqqa or Hasaka. We are only present in Damascus, Homs, and areas near the border .... In Qalamoun, the Syrian army is fighting. Hizbollah's participation is minimal".[41] According to party officials, the movement's aim was to improve the regime's position, so that it could secure a favourable negotiated outcome;[42] it did not intend, they said, to fight on its behalf indefinitely.

Yet, the Qusayr success tempted Hizbollah to push further, fighting fierce battles to control the entire Syrian-Lebanese border. It played a vital role in a February-March 2014 regime offensive in the Qalamoun area and led the campaign to capture Yabroud, allegedly the transit hub for car-bombs smuggled into Lebanon.[43]

If today the movement shows no intention of restraining itself in Syria, it is in no small part because the consequences of its intervention, for the time being at least, seem limited. Domestic reactions have been mild, a reflection of the resoluteness of its base and the weakness of its foes, notably the March 14 coalition. Sunni Islamists across the region have been infuriated, but this has not produced a coherent,

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[35] Authoritative estimates of Hizbollah's casualties in Syria are impossible to obtain because of its secrecy policy. The UK-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights asserted it lost 232 fighters in Qusayr. *The Christian Science Monitor,* 3 December 2013.

[36] The opposition, in an attempt to raise resources, arguably did so as well. Both the protagonists and media freely used terms such as "game-changer", "mother of all battles", "balance of power changer", "a key front" and "a turning point", exaggerating the strategic significance of a small, peripheral town; eg, Al-Monitor, 22 April 2013; www.dohainstitute.org/release/23f50d5e-ec95-48d6-8cca-90d73030af6f; www.bbc.co.uk/arabic/middleeast/2013/05/130524_qusair_syria.shtml; *al-Sharq al-Awsat,* 24 April 2013; "U.S. and Israel lobby reel from H[i]zbollah al-Qusayr victory", Foreign Policy Journal, 8 June 2013.

[37] Crisis Group interview, Beirut, December 2013.

[38] See "Dahiyeh celebrates 'al-Qusayr fall", *Now,* 5 June 2013.

[39] Crisis Group interview, Beirut, December 2013. In May 2013, Nasrallah told movement supporters and fighters, "I have always promised you victory, and now I renew my promise of victory again .... This battle [in Syria] is ours ... and I promise you victory", Al-Manar, 25 May 2013.

[40] Crisis Group observations, media outlets, social media pages, September 2013-February 2014. After meeting with him in October 2013, a Lebanese journalist close to the movement said, "President Assad is very comfortable; his troops have registered major advances. The whole word is adopting his initial view that the war in Syria is a war against terrorists". Crisis Group interview, Beirut, October 2013. Hizbollah-affiliated media emphasised the movement's gains while downplaying its opponents'. See, eg,, "Syria's Yabroud on way to victory: Al-Manar Exclusive", Al-Manar, 15 March 2014; "Kasab Crossing ... Illusion of Victory, Liberation", Al-Manar, 27 March 2014;

[41] "Nasrallah's December 3 interview on OTV", op. cit.

[42] Crisis Group interviews, November 2013 and senior official, December 2013, both Beirut.

[43] *Al-Hayat*, 18 February 2014; "Syria shows off car-bomb assembly site", *The Daily Star*, 18 March 2014.

coordinated response.[44] Thus far, opponents' most significant response has been an unprecedented series of spectacular explosions targeting Shiite neighbourhoods, the Iranian embassy and cultural centre in Beirut and other party assets. Though shocking, these appear uncoordinated and have affected neither Hizbollah's approach in Syria nor its perception of the risks. On the contrary, they have confirmed to the movement the soundness of its choice; if it had not intervened, party members argue, Lebanon's Shiites would have suffered even worse outrages, because their enemy would have felt triumphant and empowered. A senior Hizbollah official said:

> True, our support for the regime has carried some negative consequences. But the price of not intervening would have been comparatively far higher. We could have been surrounded by our enemies, and our physical link to Iran [via Syria] could have been severed. What price have we paid? A few car bombs? Imagine, had we not intervened, how many dozens of bombs we would have faced, together with opposition fighters in [the Lebanese town of] Arsal rather than in the [Syrian towns of] Qalamoun.[45]

The growth of extremist Sunni groups, such as al-Qaeda affiliate Jabhat al-Nusra and its offshoot, the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL),[46] helped Hizbollah's argument. It not only made confrontation with the Syrian opposition seem inevitable, but also boosted the appeal of the regime. A senior Hizbollah official said:

> The opposition -- and notably Jabhat al-Nusra and Daash [the Arabic acronym for ISIL] -- has provided a gift to the regime. It helped push people back toward the regime as a result of their behaviour. For example, the Shammar tribe [in the north east] moved away from the opposition and began asking the regime for weapons to fight al-Nusra and Daash. The same goes for the Kurds.[47]

While the Shiite movement's involvement in Syria has itself fuelled the rise of these Islamist groups,[48] the jihadi threat nevertheless discredited the Syrian opposition and its cause; the anti-Assad insurgency lost its lustre as a popular uprising.[49] This is particularly true in the West, but also among many Lebanese Christians, whose leaders like Hizbollah ally Michel Aoun consistently present Syrian Sunni extremists as an existential threat to their community.[50]

Nor has Hizbollah suffered any meaningful diplomatic penalty. Gulf and European states reacted negatively, but mildly, to its intervention. Only a single member state, Bahrain, followed through on the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) threat to list the movement as a terrorist organisation, while the EU put only

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[44] In response to Hizbollah's involvement in Syria, Lebanese Salafi sheikhs called young Sunnis to join in jihad with the rebels. "Sunni youth sign up for holy war against H[i]zbollah", Al Arabiya, 24 April 2013.

[45] Crisis Group interview, Beirut, December 2013.

[46] In February 2014, al-Qaeda disavowed and cut ties with ISIL. BBC, 3 February 2014.

[47] Crisis Group interview, Beirut, December 2013.

[48] A journalist said, "the more Hizbollah invokes Sunni extremists, the more it ignites Sunni anger, fuelling this same extremism". Crisis Group interview, Beirut, December 2013. "Hizbollah's Syrian involvement deepens regional sectarian divide", *Financial Times*, 24 May 2013; "Feltman dubs Hizb[o]llah 'soldiers of fortune,' accuses it of causing sectarian tensions", Naharnet, 25 October 2013.

[49] Even a staunch Syrian opposition member said, "I feel sad for what has become of the uprising. Jihadi groups have stolen our dream. Sometimes, I wonder if we shouldn't just accept seeing this regime remain to end this ugly war". Crisis Group interview, Washington, January 2013.

[50] Concern about jihadi groups is particularly acute in the West, as hundreds of European and, to a lesser extent, U.S. citizens have joined the fight. "Al-Qaeda training British and European 'jihadists' in Syria to set up terror cells at home", *The Telegraph,* 19 January 2014; "Jihadists returning home to Europe from Syria pose new terror threat", *The Wall Street Journal,* 4 December 2013; "Al-Qaida faction in Syria contemplating US attack, intelligence officials warn", *The Guardian*, 29 January 2014. Michel Aoun (leader of the Free Patriotic Movement), spoke of abduction of nuns by Syrian rebels: "There is a threat (to) our future, our existence, all which we believe in and what the East and Lebanon [in particular] were built upon. We have always [warned] that the threat of extremist *takfiri* thinking is ... real". "Aoun: Nuns' abduction proves threat of takfiris", *Now,* 3 December 2013.

the military branch on its list -- measures that, even if applied in full, would have had minimal impact, given Hizbollah's limited assets and interests in both regions.[51] Far from hurting the Shiite party, the GCC's reaction only highlighted its own disunity. Indeed Qatar -- a principal backer of the Syrian opposition – partially restored relations with Hizbollah after helping mediate a deal for the release of nine Shiite pilgrims captured by Syrian groups.[52]

The regional situation grew more favourable to Hizbollah in the second half of 2013. Its initial enthusiasm for revolutionary change in the Arab world had long given way to a reactionary outlook, in accordance with which it sought a return to the status quo ante. It welcomed the July 2013 ouster of Egyptian President Mohamad Morsi, which removed a regime sympathetic to the Syrian opposition,[53] and took heart from the September chemical weapons agreement, which a senior Hizbollah official took as a sign of potential rapprochement between Assad and the West: "The regime showed that it could be a reliable partner, unlike the opposition. Who on the opposition side could guarantee anything? That is why the U.S. realised that a political solution is in its best interest".[54]

D. *Views among the Shiite Community*

Hizbollah's standing among Shiites in Lebanon remains strong, despite criticism, including within its own community. [55] Detractors blame the movement for endangering Lebanon's shaky peace for the sake of its own regional interests and particularly to prop up the Syrian regime.[56] Indeed, Hizbollah's strategy seems to have rendered vulnerable the Shiite community it claims to protect. The country's recent al-Qaeda-inspired suicide bombings are unprecedented. Though there have been several surges of sectarian tension in past years, these started only after Hizbollah intervened in Syria and announced it was fighting *takfiri*s. Since April 2014, the attacks have subsided, following an agreement within the Lebanese political class that enabled the country's military and security forces to arrest dozens of alleged extremists and deploy in tense areas like Tripoli and Arsal. However, these security measures do not end the threat. As a

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[51] "Gulf states agree to blacklist H[i]zbollah as terrorist group", al-Arabiyya, 17 July 2013. "GCC rules out possibility that Gulf will blacklist Hizb[o]llah as terrorist group", Naharnet, 10 September 2013. "Bahrain first Arab country to blacklist H[i]zbollah as terrorist organisation", Al Arabiya, 9 April 2013. The EU did not act against Hizbollah's political party. "EU resists H[i]zbollah ban but lists armed wing as terrorist group", *The Guardian,* 22 July 2013. Public perception of EU disapproval evaporated when its representative in Lebanon met with a Hizbollah official responsible for international relations. *The Daily Star,* 26 July 2013.

[52] *The Daily Star,* 17 December 2013.

[53] A senior official said, "Since [army chief and Defence Minister] al-Sisi took over, those who support him voice support for the Syrian regime". Crisis Group interview, Beirut, December 2013. For background on Egyptian events, see Crisis Group Middle East/North Africa Briefing N°35, *Marching in Circles: Egypt's Dangerous Second Transition,* 7 August 2013.

[54] Crisis Group interview, Beirut, December 2013. A journalist with close ties to the party said, "the past few years show that a Western shift toward Syria is not impossible". Crisis Group interview, Beirut, October 2013. The West and its allies have done about-turns on Syria before. After seeking pressure on Damascus for years, France and Saudi Arabia began to normalise relations with the regime in 2008, essentially recognising they could not achieve their goals in the region without its cooperation. The U.S. also eased its pressure. Crisis Group Middle East Briefing N°27, *Engaging Syria? Lessons from the French Experience,* 15 January 2009; and Reports N°83, *Engaging Syria? U.S. Constraints and Opportunities,* 11 February 2009; N°92, *Reshuffling the Cards? (I): Syria's Evolving Strategy,* 14 December 2009; and N°93, *Reshuffling the Cards? (II): Syria's New Hand,* 16 December 2009.

[55] A Dahiyeh resident said, "Hizbollah's fight in Syria is wrong and unjustified. Its actions are making us pay a heavy price for nothing". A Shiite cleric opposed to Hizbollah said, "I regularly receive Shiites who complain about Hizbollah's role in Syria. They are just afraid to express their discontent in public". A resident of a southern village said, "Hizbollah is committing a historic mistake". Crisis Group interviews, Beirut, South Lebanon, October-December 2013.

[56] Crisis Group interviews, March 14 officials, Amal Movement official, journalists with close ties to March 14 and to Hizbollah, Beirut, Tripoli, South Lebanon, September-December 2013.

Tripoli sheikh put it, "many Islamists went underground waiting for a change of circumstance – the collapse of the political agreement, or an important military achievement by rebels in Syria".[57]

Given how extensive the movement's political reorientation has been, discontent is remarkably limited. Gone are the pillars of its previous strategy: strict focus on fighting Israel; reluctance to tolerate *fitna* (intra-Muslim strife); self-restraint; and confining overt action to Lebanon. It instead has embraced a regime that many Lebanese Shiites had tended to see as an unpalatable dictatorship and with which they have evinced a relative lack of sympathy. It has engaged in a war in which many see an Iranian hand.[58] Yet, even if these moves have called into question its sense of identity and priorities, they have not shaken the loyalty of its base.

At the core of Hizbollah's sustained support is the deepening Sunni-Shiite regional divide and concomitant ascent of militant (and increasingly radical) Sunni Islamism. A Shiite resident of Dahiyeh articulated the sense of existential threat that most of his coreligionists share: "At least one can live under Assad's regime. Under Salafi or jihadi rule, in contrast, what option would we [Shiites] have, except being slaughtered with hatchets?"[59] In the current climate of confessional polarisation, many Shiites see little point in a more conciliatory approach. A journalist with close ties to the movement said, "Hizbollah lost the Sunnis even prior to its military intervention in Syria. So for us Shiites the question was, why sacrifice our Syrian ally for the sake of parties that, sooner or later, were going to turn against us?"[60]

The anti-Hizbollah, anti-Shiite, anti-Alawite slogans of the Syrian opposition -- though used at the outset of the uprising only by a fringe -- caused the Shiite community to rally around Hizbollah. These refrains, which over time have become more common -- buttressed an understanding of the protests toward which Hizbollah cadres and sympathetic Shiites were predisposed.[61] Feeling threatened, they defined the uprising as a plot, projecting an Israeli-Western-Arab conspiracy and Sunni putsch onto turmoil that in fact had little to do with such concepts.

Lebanon's Shiites generally have tended to view the prospective fall of Assad's regime as the first domino in a chain that not only would deal a fatal blow to Hizbollah but would also reverse the social and po-

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[57] Crisis Group interview, Tripoli, April 2014. This agreement, known simply as the "security plan", seems to be holding despite a few attacks on the army. Fighting in tense areas, notably between Sunni and Alawite militias in Tripoli, has subsided, as have suicide bombs in Shiite neighbourhoods. This is welcome, but the calm is precarious. First, a security-based approach is unlikely to be sustainable while socio-economic grievances mount, sectarian divisions deepen and political representation is inadequately addressed. Secondly, the security plan will last only as long as the precarious political truce among the Lebanese elite. Thirdly, many Sunni militants perceive the security measures as biased, targeting their community while ignoring Hizbollah's Syrian involvement; there have been protests against army deployments in some predominantly Sunni neighbourhoods. Crisis Group interviews, residents, local leaders, sheikhs, Tripoli-Beirut, April 2014.

[58] Unconfirmed media reports allege that Iran's Supreme Leader urged Nasrallah to dispatch forces to aid the Syrian regime. "Report: H[i]zbollah chief 'secretly' meets with Iran's Khamenei to discuss Assad support", Al Arabiya, 22 April 2013; "Nasrallah secretly meet Khamenei for Teheran talks, discuss Syria crisis", *al-Bawaba,* 22 April 2013. A journalist with close ties to the Shiite movement said, "the picture of Hassan Nasrallah sitting with Supreme Leader Khamenei prior to Hizbollah making public its intervention in Syria is quite symbolic and says much about the origins of this decision". Crisis Group interview, Beirut, September 2013. Shortly after the meeting, Nasrallah said, "Syria has friends in the region and the world that will not let it fall into the hands of America, Israel and the *takfiri* groups". Al-Manar, 9 May 2013. This apparently was the first time he explicitly cited the *takfiri* threat. An Iranian official asserted that, in contrast to media reports, Nasrallah had lobbied Iran to permit him to send his fighters to Syria, using the defence of a Shiite shrine in Damascus as justification. Crisis Group interview, Tehran, 14 March 2014.

[59] Crisis Group interview, December 2013.

[60] Crisis Group interview, Beirut, December 2013.

[61] In the first few days of the uprising, some protesters shouted slogans, such as "No Hizbollah, no Iran, we want a Muslim who fears God", that were interpreted as accusing Shiites of apostasy. Crisis Group Report, *Syria's Mutating Conflict*, op. cit. Videos of Syrian protestors burning Hizbollah flags and Nasrallah's photo circulated on the internet as early as May 2011. See www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=X90KWdSquW0. Hizbollah officials gave these occurrences disproportionate weight when they concluded the uprising had a fundamentally Sunni character. Crisis Group interviews, May-December 2011.

litical gains the Shiite community achieved in the wake of their country's civil war. In a supporter's words, "the alternative to Hizbollah's strengthening is Shiites' weakening".[62]

The movement's status among Shiites improved greatly after the 2006 war with Israel that the community perceived as a major victory and significant milestone. Hizbollah was bolstered further by the movement's swift takeover and efficient management of the relief and reconstruction effort, which silenced critics and exposed its domestic foes' incompetence or, worse, indifference to the Shiites' plight.[63] Its constituents' trust was solidified not only because of the perceived victory, but also because Hizbollah's leadership had lived up to its promise to deliver one; Nasrallah emerged from the conflict the object of an intensified personality cult. These factors loomed large half a decade later, when he promised a decisive victory in Syria.[64]

Attacks against the Shiite community, by exacerbating feelings of vulnerability to *takfiris*, fortified its support for the party.[65] A resident of the Beirut suburb of Rouweiss, targeted by an explosion in August 2013, said:

> Of course, I wish we didn't have to go through all this. Of course, I wish that those who died had done so at the hands of Israelis, not Syrians. However, targeting innocent people only shows that the party has been right. Opposition armed groups in Syria are terrorists and should be eradicated. These attacks only will boost our determination and conviction that Hizbollah had to fight them before they became a greater and more dangerous threat.[66]

III. Challenges Ahead

Hizbollah's considerable strength and resilience notwithstanding, the Syrian conflict – and the local and regional changes it already is bringing – could prove perilous to the movement in the long term. The movement's position toward Syria should be seen in the context of changes in Lebanon since former Prime Minister Rafic Hariri's 2005 assassination, for which an international tribunal controversially indicted Hizbollah members, and the subsequent withdrawal of Syrian troops.[67] Hizbollah filled the void left by the departure of its ally and chief backer.[68] More importantly, it saw the resulting empowerment of its political opponents in the March 14 alliance and the growing influence over Lebanese politics of the foreign capitals that backed them (Washington, Paris and Riyadh) as a major threat. While the 2006 war increased Hizbollah's domestic confidence, it also raised the party's wariness toward its Lebanese opponents and especially the March 14 alliance, which it accused of plotting, with Saudi and Western sponsors, in the service of Israel.

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[62] He added: "Were it not for Hizbollah's power, Samir Geagea [the Christian Lebanese Forces leader] and [Former Prime Minister] Saad Hariri would control the country and deprive our community of its prerogatives". Crisis Group interview, Dahiyeh resident, November 2013.

[63] Crisis Group interviews, Hizbollah supporters, Beirut, South Lebanon, 2009-2013.

[64] A Hizbollah supporter said, "Nasrallah will never fail us". Crisis Group interview, Beirut, November 2013.

[65] Hizbollah's detractors insist its behaviour is the primary reason for the rise of anti-Shiite attacks, giving scant acknowledgement to other causes. Crisis Group interviews, Beirut, December 2013.

[66] Crisis Group interview, Hizbollah sympathiser, Beirut, December 2013.

[67] See Crisis Group Middle East Report N°100, *Trial by Fire: The Politics of the Special Tribunal for Lebanon*, 2 December 2010; "Four H[i]ezbollah members indicted in Hariri death, says source", CNN, 1 July 2011.

[68] In 2005, Hizbollah, feeling vulnerable after Syrian troops left, joined the cabinet for the first time. Crisis Group interview, Hizbollah official, January 2009. It gradually invested in the state structure, securing key positions in the security apparatus: the military tribunal, general security and airport security; several critical army posts currently are headed by individuals with ties to it or its allies. An Hizbollah official called Syria the "guarantor of resistance". Crisis Group interview, Beirut, December 2009. Many credit Hizbollah's resistance for Israel's withdrawal in May 2000 from southern Lebanon after almost two decades of occupation. The movement then kept its arms, due largely to Syria's support.

These two turning points – the Hariri assassination and its aftermath, and the 2006 war -- set Sunnis and Shiites in Lebanon on the path of rifts and radicalisation. As relations worsened, Hizbollah, which for decades had rallied Sunnis behind what is understood throughout the Arab world as resistance to Israel, increasingly came to be perceived as a sectarian militia. Its role in the Syrian conflict has taken this dynamic several steps further.

A. *Endangered Strategic and Social Depth*

The conflict has irreversibly altered Syria; regardless of the regime's military performance, it will be all but impossible for it to restore the situation that prevailed in 2010.[69] Several areas of the country are now in effect beyond its reach; even re-conquest would amount to little more than the occupation by alien forces of depopulated or hostile territory. Qusayr's fate is instructive. Though now "cleansed of Hizbollah's foes",[70] the battered, empty town has not returned to anything like normalcy.[71] If its former inhabitants return, their antagonism to the Shiite movement likely will prove implacable – a stark contrast with 2006, when areas now supportive of the Syrian opposition hosted Shiite Lebanese refugees driven out by the Israel offensive and wholeheartedly acclaimed Hizbollah's fight.[72]

Convinced that it is locked in an existential conflict with the Syrian opposition, Hizbollah is investing more in the regime. In doing so, it is alienating itself from important segments of Syrian society, as well as previously supportive constituencies in Lebanon and the region. For a party that long considered its Lebanese, Syrian and wider Arab "popular embrace" (*hadina shaabiyya*) a major strategic asset, [73] the deepening Sunni-Shiite divide is a significant setback. A senior party official admitted: "It is indeed the Shiite-Sunni rift that worries me most".[74] Questioned about this risk, he was uncompromising, arguing that Hizbollah, and the region as a whole, were living a new reality in which the old rules no longer applied and regime survival trumped all else: "There is no alternative to Assad. There are only two potential solutions: either an agreement with Bashar Assad, or total chaos. If the opposition and its allies do not accept that Assad stays on, then this war and chaos will continue for years".[75]

Hizbollah's discourse, which historically has focused on the struggle against oppression, gradually gave way to an uncompromising "either with us or against us" rhetoric and passive acceptance of its Syrian ally's brutal tactics. A senior movement official said:

> Why would we criticise the regime's tactics? This will only help the other side, and we can't do that. I'm not saying everything the regime is doing is good, but we won't gain anything by saying so. This is war; you have to work with what you've got. Even if we did criticise [certain aspects], the opposition wouldn't hear us because they only want you totally on their side. And the regime wouldn't like us telling it what to do. Finally, how could we even hope to address all of the Syrian people? There are two sides, and we can only address one. The pro-regime audience loves us, but it's impossible to please the other side at the same time. Take for example the Lebanese people: no matter what you say, the other side hates you.[76]

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[69] "Regime ties to large sectors of society are broken, its hold on broad swathes of its territory at best tenuous. Even if it survives the crisis, it likely will not recover the ability to govern effectively and will enjoy few options but to rule through terror". Crisis Group Middle East Briefing N°33, *Syria's Phase of Radicalisation,* 10 April 2012, p. 5. Numerous Hizbollah officials said the pre-uprising situation is irretrievable. Crisis Group interviews, Beirut, October-December 2013.

[70] Crisis Group interview, Hizbollah official, Beirut, November 2013.

[71] Crisis Group telephone interview, Syrian activist, March 2014.

[72] Crisis Group interviews and observations, Damascus and central Syria, August 2006.

[73] Crisis Group interviews, Hizbollah officials, Beirut, August 2006-December 2010.

[74] Crisis Group interview, Beirut, December 2013.

[75] Crisis Group interview, Beirut, December 2013.

[76] Crisis Group interview, Beirut, December 2013.

Such realpolitik is a radical departure for an organisation that heretofore had been characterised by a principled ideology.

Though its leaders warn against sectarian strife, Hizbollah's role in Syria, like that of its Salafi adversaries, has helped fuel it.[77] As opposed to its clash with Sunni gunmen during the party's May 2008 takeover of west Beirut, which it justified as necessary to protect its independent communication network and as vital for the struggle against Israel,[78] Hizbollah has come to define what it is fighting *for* in terms of whom it is fighting *against*. That it describes this adversary as *takfiri*, rather than authentically Sunni, does little to reassure the many Sunnis who perceive Hizbollah's intervention as motivated by sectarian concerns. The party's own propaganda has undermined whatever claims it still makes to remain above the sectarian fray.

By lumping the broad ideological spectrum of Syrian rebel militants under the *takfiri* banner, Hizbollah does not distinguish between non-Islamists, mainstream Islamists and extremists such as al-Qaeda-style jihadis -- thus strengthening the perception that its war is against Sunnis in general.[79] To many Sunnis, *takfiri* is merely the latest Hizbollah slur against them, provoking resentment that has bolstered jihadi recruitment and empowered Lebanese extremists.[80] The resulting animosity has boosted the fundraising capabilities of Salafists,[81] increased weapons smuggling;[82] and heightened the sense that Hizbollah could be challenged. A journalist from Tripoli warned:

> Hizbollah, by continuously accusing Sunnis and *takfiris*, is igniting Sunni radicalism. Hatred toward the Shiite party has become so deeply entrenched that many Sunnis see Koteiba al-Satem [the perpetrator of a suicide attack in Dahiyeh] as a hero.[83]

That the murder of Hizbollah supporters is seen as welcome vengeance in some Sunni milieus indicates how profound Sunni alienation has become.[84]

Confessional politics has facilitated regional rivalries. Iran's and Saudi Arabia's dispute has led to extraordinary forms and levels of violence, even by the region's dismal standards. Together with others such as Qatar and Turkey,[85] each has fuelled sectarian polarisation while blaming the other.[86] Particularly un-

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[77] Nasrallah repeatedly has warned of a Sunni-Shiite rift. He accused al-Qaeda-linked *takfiri* militants of "trying to sow discord between Shiite and Sunni Muslims in Syria". *Tehran Times,* 3 July 2013. "The worst that has happened in Syria and has been going on for years is the sectarian discourse. Sectarianism is the worst and most dangerous dimension. The conflict in Syria is between two camps, two fronts, two projects, not between Sunnis and Shiites. It is not between two sects. Why are you [the opposition and its sponsors] transforming it into a battle between two sects?". Speech, *Youtube,* 14 June 2013. See also other speeches, Al-Manar, 25 January 2013; 25 May 2013.

[78] For background, see Crisis Group Middle East Report N°23, *Lebanon: Hizbollah's Weapons Turn Inward,* 15 May 2008.

[79] Crisis Group interviews, Lebanese and Syrian refugees, Tripoli, Beirut, October-December 2013. A Syrian activist said, "when the U.S. wages a 'war on terror', most Muslims around the world perceive it as a war against them. Hizbollah and its war on *takfiri*s is quite the same for the Sunnis". Crisis Group interview, Tripoli, November 2013.

[80] See Crisis Group Reports, *A Precarious Balancing Act; Too Close for Comfort,* both op. cit.

[81] Crisis Group interviews, salafists, sheikhs and Syrian activists, Tripoli, October-December 2013.

[82] Crisis Group Report, *Too Close for Comfort,* op. cit., pp. 20-22.

[83] Crisis Group interview, Beirut, January 2014.

[84] Crisis Group interviews and observations, Sunni sheikhs and militants, Tripoli and Beirut, November-December 2013.

[85] Having antagonised former allies such as Iran and Hizbollah, Turkey aligned itself with two conservative Sunni Gulf states, Saudi Arabia and Qatar. It is increasingly perceived by its own Alawite (in Turkey, the Alevi) community, the Syrian regime and its allies and other observers as a Sunni actor. More dangerously, at a minimum it has turned a blind eye to Sunni jihadists using its border to enter Syria. See Crisis Group Europe Reports N°225, *Blurring the Borders: Syrian Spillover Risks for Turkey*, 30 April 2013; and N°230, *The Rising Costs of Turkey's Syrian Quagmire*, 30 April 2014; "Is Turkey going to reconsider its Sunni sectarian policy in Syria?", The Turkey Analyst, 25 September 2013; "Turkey's sectarian war with Iran over Syria and Iraq", Al-Monitor, 4 January 2013; "Erdogan Stokes the Sectarian Fires", *The New York Times*, 7 October 2013; The 'Sunnification' of Turkish policy", Al-Monitor, 1 March 2013. In Doha, Youssef al-Qaradawi, a prominent Qatar-based Egyptian cleric who heads the influential International Union of Muslim Scholars addressed a rally in deeply sectarian terms: "Every [Sunni] Muslim trained to fight and capable of doing that [must] make himself available [to fight in Syria]. Iran is pushing forward arms and men, so why do we stand idle? The leader of the Party of Satan [ie, Hizbollah] comes to

helpful has been tolerance of or resort to foreign fighters, most motivated by powerful sectarian impulses. As Sunnis from Tunisia, Libya, Lebanon and the West have joined opposition rebels, Shiite Lebanese, Iranians, Iraqis, Afghans and Pakistanis have entered Syria on behalf of the regime.[87] Despite the regime's efforts to project a secular image, Hizbollah and fellow non-Syrian Shiite militants, like their Sunni counterparts, fight under a jihad banner.[88] Like their Sunni counterparts, they use highly sectarian rhetoric: for instance, they liken the war to the seventh century Karbala battle between the Prophet Muhammad's grandson, Imam Hussein, and forces loyal to the Umayyad Caliph Yazid, an event of tremendous importance to Shiites and central to the split between Islam's two main schools, Sunni and Shiite.[89]

Hizbollah is an integral part of this regional struggle. In particular, it has waged a campaign against Saudi Arabia, accusing it of thwarting the formation of the Lebanese cabinet, torpedoing a peace process to end the Syrian conflict and ordering an attack on the Iranian embassy in Lebanon.[90] Adopting the same bellicose rhetoric its opponents use toward Iran, Hizbollah has fallen into the trap of sectarian politics, something that it had carefully avoided in previous years.[91]

There is no easy exit from this trap. Ultimately, neither side can win the Sunni-Shiite struggle; the backlash against Hizbollah's intervention in Syria is already revealing the limits of its military power. While the movement has efficiently fought the Israeli army, its stockpiles of rockets are less effective against jihadi militants. Hizbollah has been trained to fight guerrilla-style battles against a much larger army, not defend itself against suicide bombers. That jihadi-linked attacks target civilians rather than military forces makes them all the more difficult for the movement to contain. Any attempt to seal off its home community – particularly the Dahiyeh suburb in southern Beirut -- would gravely disrupt its ability

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fight the Sunnis .... Now we know what the Iranians want .... They want continued massacres to kill Sunnis". Qatar has reportedly expelled dozens of Lebanese Shiites supportive of Hizbollah. "Syria conflict: Cleric Qaradawi urges Sunnis to join rebels", BBC, 1 June 2013; "Qatar 'expels Lebanese after GCC H[i]zbollah decision", *Now*, 20 June 2013.

[86] Beside direct support to the Syrian regime, Iran has backed Shiite groups fighting in Syria, where it is believed to have formed an elite militia. A leaked video showed a figure described by the Iranian media as a senior Revolutionary Guard officer saying, "the current war in Syria is that of Islam versus the non-believers, good versus evil .... This [Islamic] front is supported by Hizbollah. The fighters are Iranians, H[i]zbollah, the Iraqi and Afghan Mujahideen and others. The opponents are Israel, Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Qatar. Plus America, England, France and Europe". "Leaked video: Iran guiding thousands of Shiite fighters to Syria", *The Christian Science Monitor,* 23 September 2013. Saudi Arabia has funded and provided weapons to Syrian rebels, while quelling Shiite protesters at home and militarily intervening in Bahrain to thwart a popular uprising, perceived as predominantly Shiite. "Saudi Arabia clashes in eastern province of Qatif", BBC, 4 October 2011; "Saudi troops enter Bahrain to help put down unrest", *The New York Times,* 14 March 2011.

[87] "Foreign fighters flood both sides in Syrian war", NPR News, 17 January 2014. "As foreign fighters flood Syria, fears of a new extremist haven", *The New York Times,* 8 August 2013; "Leaked video", op. cit.; "Video appears to show H[i]zbollah and Iraqi Shiites fighting in Syria", *The Christian Science Monitor*, 18 January 2013.

[88] Hizbollah's media outlets often announce the death of movement fighters in Syria killed while performing their "jihadi duty". See, for instance, al-Manar, 28 December 2013; 23 April 2014.

[89] Social media outlets teemed with pages and videos calling for defence of religious shrines in Syria and praising young Shiites who died in a jihad to protect them, eg, www.facebook.com/ groups/466006650098572/#_=_; www.facebook.com/AldfanMrqdAlsydZynblyhaAlslam.; The display of banners, photos and songs glorifying Shiite symbols, previously a practice mainly during Ashura [commemoration of Imam Hussein's death], is now omnipresent in predominantly Shiite areas. A song glorifying Sayyida Zeinab, sister of Imam Hussein, was loudly played in Beirut's airport. Many interlocutors, including some Shiites, expressed annoyance with practices viewed as "provocative and defiant". Crisis Group interviews, Shiite journalist, Beirut, December 2013; residents, Beirut, 2013. observations, Beirut neighbourhoods and airport, 2013-May 2014.

[90] "Hariri blasts Nasrallah over Saudi accusations", *The Daily Star,* 14 November 2013; "Riyadh seeking to derail Syria peace talks: Nasrallah", *The Daily Star,* 28 October 2013; "Nasrallah links Saudi Arabia to Iran embassy attack", *Now,* 3 December 2013.

[91] Hizbollah's opponents regularly accuse Iran of controlling Lebanon or employing Hizbollah to impose its will. Some have gone so far as to call on it "to keep its hands off Lebanon", vowing to "end the Iranian revolutionary occupation in Lebanon so that it can remain a country for dialogue, pluralism, democracy, modernity and openness". Former Prime Minister Saad Hariri said, "I know [Nasrallah] won't listen to a Lebanese voice [to end participation in Syria] because the Iranian Fatwa in his ears is stronger and pure". "Future vows to end Iranian 'occupation' of Lebanon", and "Future bloc to Iran: hands off Lebanon", *The Daily Star*, 17 December 2013; 7 February 2014.

to function normally; measures taken to secure Beirut's Shiite neighbourhoods have already disrupted social and commercial life.[92] Sealing off the Sunni areas of Lebanon where those who facilitate attacks on Shiite targets are thought to hide likely would reduce the threat at best only temporarily.[93]

The trap is growing tighter, because its adversaries are convinced that they must actively and urgently confront Hizbollah. Many Lebanese Sunnis trace a history of political events that leads inexorably to this conclusion: the 2005 killing of Sunni leader Rafic Hariri; Hizbollah's swift takeover of the capital in May 2008; and its overthrow of the Saad Hariri-led government in January 2011. Such developments are seen as part of a wider pattern playing out in other countries, such as Iraq, where Shiite dominance and Iranian influence generate humiliation, oppression and injustice among many Sunnis.[94]

Hizbollah's challenge is all the greater given the over one million Syrian refugees in Lebanon, the vast majority of whom are Sunni and resentful of the movement's military role in their country. A Syrian activist said, "Syrians will never forget that Hizbollah fought and killed their families. We might reconcile among each other. However, Hizbollah will always remain an intruder that killed Syrians and occupied Syria".[95] The presence of Syrian refugees in Shiite areas generates intense suspicion and distrust among the party's supporters.[96] Only a small minority has been politically and militarily active, but Lebanon could yet witness militancy among refugees. According to a senior security official:

> If the presence of Syrians refugees lasts for too long, it could become a greater danger than the Palestinians'. They are still busy settling up their own situation. After a while, they will engage in the political game. There are real risks of their politicisation. In some villages, the number of refugees is equal to that of Lebanese.[97]

B. *Hizbollah's Metamorphosis: Whither the Resistance?*

For the Shiite party, the struggle against Israel, officially at least, remains its ultimate goal, the rationale for its creation and continued existence as a resistance movement. It still serves today as a rallying call for its partisans, who describe Israel as the greatest threat in the region.[98] Hizbollah insists its involvement in Syria does not affect its ability to confront Israel. A senior party official insisted: "We are still ready for a fight against Israel. We have what you can call special forces fighting in Syria, and their presence there does not detract us from the resistance [against Israel]".[99] Official discourse argues that the jihadis are in league with Israel, so what appears as two struggles is in fact one.[100]

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[92] See "Social, economic tolls wear down Dahiyeh residents", *Now,* 2 February 2014. www.southlebanon.org/?p=109831

[93] Shiite residents, protesting rockets and suicide car bombings targeting their community, blocked the main road to the Sunni village of Arsal in the Bekaa. Associated Press, 19 March 2014.

[94] Crisis Group interviews, Sunni officials, residents, clerics, activists, Beirut, Akkar, Tripoli, Saida, Arsal, December 2011-April 2014. Crisis Group Middle East Report N°96, *Lebanon's Politics: The Sunni Community and Hariri's Future Current,* 26 May 2010.

[95] Crisis Group interview, Tripoli, November 2013.

[96] In several cases, suicide bombings have been followed by attacks against Syrians. Consequently, refugees stayed off the streets in Shiite areas during a Hizbollah-organised march to commemorate Ashura. Crisis Group observations, November 2013. A shopkeeper in a Shiite neighborhood said, "Hizbollah members and Lebanese authorities didn't allow any stranger in or out. One Syrian was even not allowed to go to his house". Crisis Group interview, Khandaq al-Ghamiq, November 2013.

[97] Crisis Group interview, Beirut, December 2013.

[98] Crisis Group interviews, Hizbollah members and partisans, Beirut, South Lebanon, October-December 2013.

[99] Another official added: "The resistance [to Israel] rests on completely separate military assets we are not committing to the Syrian front". Crisis Group interviews, Beirut, December 2013.

[100] In May 2013, Nasrallah declared: "There is an axis led by the United States, while the other players are working under its orders. Everyone knows this axis is supported by Israel, while al-Qaeda and other *takfiri* organisations from around the world were paid to take part in it …. The *takfiris* are the most prevalent group in the Syrian opposition". Naharnet, 25 May 2013.

However, even for a skilled communicator like Nasrallah, convincingly linking those struggles is a challenge. Claims that the Syrian rebellion is "under the control of the Israeli-American-*takfiri* powers"[101] strains credulity in a way that the party line rarely has in the past. Even some within the Shiite movement's inner circle are doubtful. A journalist close to the movement said, "we know that these arguments don't make much sense. They are designed for public consumption".[102]

With its capacities overstretched, it is not clear how competently Hizbollah could confront Israel should the eventuality arise. Not only has it sent some of its seasoned troops into Syria, but it finds itself compelled to dedicate ever-more resources to securing its heartland against domestic threats. It is unknown if and how the Syrian regime, weakened and transformed, could support its ally meaningfully should conflict with Israel be renewed. It has depleted much of its conventional and unconventional military assets, and any provocative actions, such as boosting arms transfers to Hizbollah, might prompt Israeli retaliation that would threaten its survival.

Hizbollah's home front also looks very different than in 2006. Important Lebanese, Syrian and Arab constituencies may continue to support it against Israel, but the movement now has to contend with hostile domestic and Syrian elements that might seize an opportunity provided by an Israeli attack. Moreover, Hizbollah's popular base would have a harder time seeking refuge in strife-torn Syria.

Support to Assad has also strained Hizbollah's relations with its former close ally, Hamas, leaving it largely devoid of significant ties to the Palestinian cause it espouses. Despite attempts to repair relations between the Palestinian movement and the so-called axis of resistance, rapprochement remains elusive.[103] Worse still from Hizbollah's perspective, the regime in Damascus has been reaching out to the Fatah leadership based in Ramallah – Hamas's rival – which, among adherents to the resistance narrative, is widely seen to lack legitimacy as a representative of the Palestinian struggle.[104]

The reputational harm to Hizbollah is no less important than the material. Once it was widely respected among Sunnis in Syria and the region; now, by contrast, many Syrians and Lebanese see Israel as a relatively benign enemy.[105] The Syrian battlefields are killing off veterans of the struggle against Israel[106] and crowning new heroes who are making their reputation against a different foe – and whose battlefield expertise is very different from those they are replacing. In this sense, the longer the fight in Syria continues, the less risk the movement will likely pose to Israel.

C. *Hubris?*

In recent years, Hizbollah has sought to project overwhelming power whenever engaging a rival, an important shift from the military doctrine to which it adhered in the 1990s.[107] In the wake of Israel's withdrawal from south Lebanon in 2000, successive threats to its political standing and military infrastructure

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[101] "Nasrallah says H[i]zbollah will not bow to sectarian threats", *Now*, 14 June 2013. He also said, "[i]f Syria falls into the hands of America, Israel and *takfiris*, the resistance will be besieged and Israel will enter Lebanon and impose its will", "H[i]zbollah's war in Syria threatens to engulf Lebanon", *The Independent*, 26 May 2013.

[102] Crisis Group interview, Beirut, November 2013.

[103] "Hamas and Iran in talks to repair ties", *The Telegraph,* 1 August 2013. Crisis Group Report, *The Next Round in Gaza,* op.cit., p. 4. A Hamas official said, "[t]oday we can't speak of a rapprochement with Iran. We don't have hostile relations with them, but we don't get anything from them either". Ibid, p. 9.

[104] In October 2013, Bashar Assad met with Abbas Zaki, special envoy of Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas. Al-Manar, 7 October 2013.

[105] Comments such as "the Syrian regime and its allies are worse than Israel" and "Israel has never done what Assad is doing" frequently can be heard among pro-opposition Lebanese residents, Syrian activists and refugees. Crisis Group interviews, Beirut, Tripoli, October 2013-April 2014.

[106] The profile and role of Hizbollah's fighters killed in Syria is not clear. However, movement officials and media have referred to some as commanders, including senior ones. See, eg, Press TV, 30 November 2013; Naharnet, 8 Decmber 2013; Al-Manar, 19 December 2013, 18 April 2014.

[107] Hizbollah's primary focus 1990-2000 was on Israel. It expanded its social network in predominantly Shiite areas but let the Shiite Amal Movement attend to the community's political needs.

have prompted it to step more forcefully into the Lebanese political scene: its insistence on retaining its arsenal following Israel's withdrawal;[108] the repercussions of the 2005 Rafic Hariri assassination and subsequent withdrawal of Syrian troops from Lebanon; tensions over the international tribunal investigating Hariri's murder; and the 2006 war against Israel and suggestions that the March 14 alliance sought to undermine the resistance.[109] After the 2006 war, the Shiite movement became increasingly confrontational, adopting more threatening rhetoric and turning its weapons inward.[110]

Likewise, the movement and its supporters repeatedly have resorted to intimidation to silence dissenting voices within the Shiite community. In May 2008, Shiite militants ousted the then-Tyr mufti, Ali al-Amine, looting and burning his office. He said, "they were making an example. They were sending a clear message that this would be the fate of anyone who opposes them".[111] Other anti-Hizbollah Shiites have similar stories of intimidation.[112] This muscle-flexing is mirrored among the rank-and-file, whose behaviour is seen as increasingly arrogant and contemptuous. In Hizbollah heartlands, Shiite residents complain about what they call the thuggishness of some community members. Even ardent supporters admit that in the current militarized environment, Hizbollah's aggressiveness is manifest at home. A partisan conceded: "Many Shiites feel that Hizbollah's power is their own, as individuals. This is reflected in some negative social behaviour. Some adopt provocative attitudes even in the smallest issues, such as a fight over a parking spot.[113]

Such behaviour is by no means limited to the Shiite community in Lebanon, but other groups tend to believe that Shiites likely will not be held accountable, due to the intervention of Hizbollah and the smaller Amal Movement, which, they think, sometimes dissuade security forces and the judiciary from arresting or detaining Shiites.[114] "I don't go to Dahiyeh, there are lots of thugs there", a taxi driver said. "I had a car accident once. The person responsible for the accident, insulted me, threatened me and walked away. I just could do nothing about it". A women whose son was hit by a car in a Shiite neighbourhood said, "I

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[108] The Christian opposition, Druze leader Walid Jumblatt and Rafic Hariri, believing Israel's withdrawal would mean Hizbollah's disarmament, urged deploying the army on the southern border.

[109] For background, see Crisis Group Middle East Reports N°48, *Lebanon: Managing the Gathering Storm*, 5 December 2005; N°57, *Israel/Palestine/Lebanon: Climbing out of the Abyss*, 25 July 2006; N°69, *Hizbollah and the Lebanese Crisis,* 10 October 2007; *Trial by Fire*, op. cit.; and N°97, *Drums of War: Israel and the "Axis of Resistance",* 2 August 2010.

[110] On Hizbollah's May 2008 takeover of Beirut, see Crisis Group Briefing, *Lebanon: Hizbollah's Weapons Turn Inward*, op. cit. Another example was the brief deployment of its unarmed militants in Beirut's streets during the February 2011 political crisis. This show of force, called in Lebanon the "incident of the black shirts", was intended to warn its opponents against renominating Saad Hariri as prime minister after Hizbollah and its allies toppled him. Another example was the response to the indictment of party members by the international tribunal investigating Rafic Hariri's assassination. Nasrallah said, "[m]istaken is the one who thinks that we will allow the arrest or detainment of any of our mujahideen. We will cut off the hand that tries to get to them". *The Daily Star,* 12 November 2010.

[111] Crisis Group interview, Beirut, November 2013. An anti-Hizbollah journalist commented: "When I raise concerns about Hizbollah's dominance and the need to confront it, many would tell me: 'haven't you seen what they did to Sayyed [a religious honorific] Ali al-Amine!'" Crisis Group interview, Beirut, November 2013.

[112] Crisis Group interviews, anti-Hizbollah Shiites, Beirut, South Lebanon, October-December 2013. A journalist said, "when you live in Dahiyeh and are opposed to Hizbollah, you must accept to lead a difficult life. You will probably feel isolated. If you oppose, or simply don't follow, Hizbollah, you can't run a business. Party members, partisans, supporters will just boycott your shop". Crisis Group interview, Beirut, November 2013. Another said, "I and my family members are recurrently insulted and threatened. Any visitor or guest I received will be followed by Hizbollah militants. Some friends have asked to meet outside Dahiyeh". Crisis Group interview, Beirut, October 2013. An article in pro-Hizbollah *Al-Akhbar*, "Wikileaks: America's Shiite tools in Lebanon", accused several Shiite journalists and figures who met with U.S. officials of being agents and informers. A journalist cited in it said, "in Shiite milieus, accusing someone of working for the Americans amounts to a charge of treason. This article was calling for our extermination". Crisis Group interview, Beirut, November 2013. A young woman who criticised Hizbollah's support to the Syrian regime was threatened and insulted on Facebook and banned from returning to her village. *Al-Modon,* 23 May 2013.

[113] Crisis Group interview, Hizbollah supporter, Beirut, November 2013.

[114] Across the political spectrum, parties and leaders protect supporters, blocking accountability for criminal or thuggish behaviour. However Hizbollah, in some areas it controls, denies access to state security forces, giving rise to belief Shiites are more sheltered than other communities.

didn't file a complaint, I just renounced my right [to claim hospital expenses]. I cannot fight with a Shiite".[115]

In Syria, too, Hizbollah has projected excessive power. What began as a limited operation to boost the regime and deter its enemies across the border has expanded into a wide-ranging intervention, shifting the movement's posture from reactive defence to what looks to many like pro-active belligerence. A party official said candidly: "When Hizbollah publicly revealed its intervention in Syria, the message to its foes was clear: the movement is a force to be reckoned with".[116] After Nasrallah declared in April 2014 that the regime was safe, and Syria's territorial integrity was guaranteed, the movement not only left its troops next door, but it also seemed committed to invest yet more in the hope of complete victory.[117] The not-so-subtle subtext is that Hizbollah's capacity and ambition have grown to the extent that it can forcibly impose the rules of the game, not just in Lebanon but in Syria too.

Its apparent hubris has provoked its enemies and weakened vital alliances throughout the region. Confronted with a new range of threats, Hizbollah has become exposed; by pursuing supremacy, it has become more vulnerable.

IV. .Conclusion

Hizbollah has many reasons to withdraw its troops from Syria, as critics call upon it to do.[118] The regime's immediate survival is no longer at stake. Soon the long-term costs of extended intervention will become clear. Stopping all Lebanese involvement in the Syrian war would appear to be the best way to insulate Lebanon from a more tragic and bloody escalation. Ideally, a binding UN Security Council resolution banning all foreign fighters from Syria would be the natural way to de-escalate the conflict.

In practice, however, it is unrealistic to expect either regional or global powers to pursue such a course. In what has become a zero-sum conflict, the stakes are too high and the movement's involvement too deep to retract. Moreover, from Hizbollah's perspective the rising costs of its intervention in Syria still do not counterbalance its immediate gains: averting the downfall of the regime, dislodging rebels from areas adjacent to Lebanon's borders and preventing worse outrages against Shiites. It is keen to prove the soundness of its course by repeatedly invoking the *takfiri* threat. It seems uninterested in accommodation, not least because suing for compromise, in the idiom of the region, has become tantamount to weakness and retreat and would undermine the narrative the movement has articulated as justification for its endeavour. As an Islamist official put it, "Hizbollah has no option but to return home with a clear-cut victory".[119]

In the process of pursuing such a victory however, Hizbollah is fuelling the very dangers it is trying to combat. As a result, the Shiite party and its constituency seem more vulnerable than ever before to external threats, and the strategic depth deemed essential to its struggle with Israel looks increasingly endangered.

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[115] Crisis Group interviews, Christian and Sunni neighborhood residents respectively, Beirut, November 2013.

[116] Crisis Group interview, Hizbollah official, Beirut, October 2013.

[117] *As-Safir*, 8 April 2014. Naïm Qassem, Hizbollah's deputy secretary general, said, "until now we consider our presence in Syria necessary and fundamental", Reuters, 9 April 2014; Nasrallah said, "it is natural for Bashar Assad to run for the [Syrian presidential] elections", and Qassem added: "I believe the election will take place on its due date, and Assad will run and win decisively", ibid. Two weeks after these statements, the Syrian regime announced presidential elections for June 2014. Opponents expect they will confirm Assad's victory and end the prospect of a negotiated solution. *The Independent*, 21 April 2013.

[118] See, eg, the call by Lebanese intellectual Fawaz Traboulsi, *As-Safir,* 10 October 2012; and the speech of the ex-president of the Syrian National Coalition addressed to Nasrallah.
www.facebook.com/ahmad.mouaz.alkhatib.alhasani/posts/637999119560485.

[119] Crisis Group interview, Jamaa Islamiyya leader (the Lebanese branch of the Muslim Brotherhood), Beirut, December 2013.

The Syrian conflict has yet to play out fully in Lebanon, but jihadism, still limited, is on the rise. Lebanon's weak security apparatus, eroding state institutions and multi-confessional society render it vulnerable to the gathering threats. In Lebanon as in Syria, any meaningful solution must address, among other issues, the Sunni-Shiite divide that Hizbollah and its enemies are pushing to new levels.

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