BATTERED SURVIVOR
HEZBOLLAH AT HOME AND ABROAD

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ROUNDTABLE REPORT

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Cover photo by Bilal Jawich/Xinhua via Getty Images. Contents photo by Furkan Guldemir/Anadolu Agency/Getty Images.

Bilal Y. Saab

I. Introduction

The past decade and a half have been a real whirlwind for Hezbollah.

The Lebanese Shi'a group fought Israel to a standstill in a destructive 33-day war in 2006. It lost its iconic military chief and special operative Imad Mughniyeh in 2008 as a result of a joint assassination by the Israeli Mossad and the American CIA in Damascus. It intervened in Syria's civil war after 2011 and paid dearly for saving its ally, Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, in both blood and treasure. It was deprived of a critical champion in Tehran and partner in the region — Iranian Quds Force Commander Qassem Soleimani — due to a lethal U.S. strike in Iraq at the beginning of the year. And it has had to deal with discontent within its own support base due to terrible economic conditions across Lebanon that are unlikely to improve any time soon given the severity of the country's current financial and political crisis.

And yet, Hezbollah seems to have weathered all of these storms, at least for now.

The organization is likely to survive as long as it has the backing of the majority of Lebanese Shi'ites and Iran. Despite the Trump administration's "maximum pressure" campaign against Tehran, which has caused much economic pain for the Iranian regime, and despite the frustration felt by many Lebanese Shi'ites over Hezbollah's decreasing ability to provide them with social goods, these two critical sources of support for the group do not seem to be in real jeopardy.

However, it's one thing for Hezbollah to survive and another altogether for it to thrive, the latter being increasingly in doubt, thus opening up opportunities for more effective policies of containment by its adversaries, including Washington. Aside from some unexpected, catastrophic scenarios including the downfall of the Iranian regime as a result of a U.S.-Iran war or another military confrontation with Israel that ends up declawing or crippling Hezbollah, there are multiple challenges looming on the horizon that the group will have to deal with. These include its ability to:

- Navigate Lebanon's unprecedented financial and economic crisis without losing its political dominance;
- Sustain its regional military role and international operations after the death of Soleimani and the political-economic deterioration of the "home front;"
- Balance between the desire to avenge Soleimani and the risk of inviting serious punishment by an unpredictable Trump administration;
- Repair the bond with disgruntled Lebanese Shi'ites, although without the economic means to do so;
- Manage the eventual passing of key but aging ally Nabih Berri, the Lebanese Parliament speaker and Amal party chief, and maintain unity in the Lebanese Shi'a community;
- Maintain cordial relations with European governments, several of which have adopted more aggressive policies toward the group;
- Recalibrate its relationship with Damascus now that it has become the more senior partner.

The following contributions, each designed to answer a single question, touch briefly on these issues. I am very grateful to the authors — Nicholas Blanford, Nizar Hamzeh, Matthew Levitt, Magnus Ranstorp, Bruce Riedel, Randa Slim, and Michael Young — all of whom are renowned and longtime analysts of Hezbollah, for lending us their unique expertise.

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Nicholas Blanford

II. How is the U.S. targeted killing of Qassem Soleimani likely to affect Hezbollah's war calculations with Israel and its overall military readiness?

The targeted killing of Major General Qassem Soleimani in a U.S. air strike in Baghdad on Jan. 3 was a morale blow to Hezbollah, but the Quds Force leader's death is unlikely to have a significant impact on the Lebanese group's war calculus and military readiness.

For someone that was once dubbed in a *New Yorker* magazine profile as "the Shadow Commander," Soleimani in recent years had developed something of a personality cult, smiling enigmatically in photographs alongside beaming Shi'a warriors in the battlefields of Syria and Iraq, consulting with his top lieutenants such as Hezbollah leader Sheikh Hassan Nasrallah, or praying in Beirut beside the tomb of Imad Mughniyah, Hezbollah's slain military commander. Soleimani carried an air of seeming invincibility, either believing that the U.S. and Israel would not risk assassinating him, or possibly eschewing caution in the fatalistic hope that his often-stated goal of achieving martyrdom would be fulfilled.

Soleimani's death came as Hezbollah faces a host of challenges. Mass protests against Lebanon's sectarian leadership erupted in mid-October amid an unprecedented economic crisis. The new government in Beirut is composed of ministers approved by Hezbollah and its allies, which has led some to brand it "Hezbollah's government" and raised doubts over whether it will be able to attract foreign assistance to reverse the crisis.

In addition, Hezbollah, along with its patron Iran, is suffering the effect of U.S. sanctions, which has placed the party under financial pressure. Salaries to fighters have been cut or are deferred, donation bins have materialized in Hezbollah-supporting areas, and even Nasrallah has spoken of the party's fiscal difficulties.

Even the confrontation with Israel appears to have taken a back seat since the 2006 war. Hezbollah's cadres have spent the past decade seeing action in far-flung battlefields in Syria, Iraq, and Yemen. Hezbollah's expeditionary roles have tarnished its anti-Israel credentials, at least in the eyes of the region's Sunnis, and highlighted its importance as Iran's greatest enabler for power projection across the Middle East.

Nevertheless, militarily, Hezbollah has never been stronger. Its fighting force has swollen from a few thousand in 2006 to some 30,000 trained combatants, most of them battle-hardened in Syria. Israel assesses that Hezbollah has acquired between 130,000 and 150,000 rockets and missiles, ten times the number it had in 2006, and some of them are being upgraded into precision-guided systems capable of striking targets within a 10-meter radius. Small wonder, perhaps, that Israel today counts Hezbollah as its most pressing conventional threat.

Hezbollah is an institution that is not dependent on any one individual. After all, it has lost senior leaders in the past — Sheikh Abbas Musawi in 1992, Mughniyah in 2008, Mustafa Badreddine in 2016 — as well as numerous veteran officers in Syria, without any significant loss of capabilities. Soleimani's death actually served to rally Hezbollah's ranks amid a collective sense of outrage and anger at his brutal demise. Nasrallah may miss Soleimani's counsel and friendship, but Hezbollah will remain a potent threat to Israel irrespective of who heads the Quds Force.

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Nizar Hamzeh

III. Does Hezbollah have an interest in enabling renewed Syrian influence in Lebanon?

Since its inception in 1982, Hezbollah has grown to be Iran's most powerful proxy military organization inside and outside Lebanon. However, three major fears stand behind Hezbollah's interest in enabling renewed Syrian influence in Lebanon.

First, fear of losing the land corridor that connects Hezbollah to Iran via Syria and Iraq. This corridor is the sole land route for Iranian weaponry and finances to reach Hezbollah. Since the 2006 war with Israel, Iran has significantly increased its military assistance to Hezbollah through that route. With the presence of Hezbollah and the IRGC in Syria since 2011, sophisticated Iranian arms and missiles continue to make their way into the Lebanese group's hands. Furthermore, the U.S. financial sanctions against Hezbollah have forced the party to depend more heavily on the Syrian route for its financial transactions, through which it has reportedly received hundreds of millions of dollars in cash from Iran.

Second, fear of losing Syria as a central regional ally. Hezbollah's political and military objectives in Syria were clear from the very beginning: to save a regime it sees as a vital ally in any future wars with Israel. While Iran has provided weapons, training, and funding for all of Hezbollah's operations and wars, Syria's contributions have also been crucial. Since the 2006 war, it has provided a safe haven for the party's leaders, members, and injured fighters, as well as a supply line for necessities including food, medical supplies, and gasoline. Syria's political and logistics support has ensured that Hezbollah, even if it hasn't gained the upper hand, has at least been able to maintain its position. Along with Iran's military support, Syrian assistance helped Hezbollah to reverse its flagging momentum during the 2006 war and in the years since, enabling the party to gain and maintain the relative regional advantage it enjoys today.

Third, fear of losing its hegemonic power over Lebanese politics. The continued support of Syria has accorded Hezbollah a degree of control over Lebanese politics. However, Hezbollah is not an ideological ally of Syria, despite its reliance on the

Syrian regime to maintain the flow of Iranian support. The party's interests and vision for Lebanon are religiously oriented and not identical to the secular orientation of the Syrian regime. Furthermore, Lebanon is currently experiencing an acute economic crisis that has manifested in a fierce social protest partly against corruption and partly against Hezbollah's arms. This may put pressure on the Assad regime to play a more balanced role between Hezbollah and other Lebanese sectarian factions should Bashar al-Assad desire to regain influence in Lebanese politics.

Reluctant to jeopardize its much-needed relationship with the Assad regime, Hezbollah may thus be obliged to support renewed Syrian influence in Lebanon. However, Syria's future relations with Hezbollah will ultimately depend on Assad, who is also at a crossroad and may have to choose between his international patron, Russia, and his regional patron, Iran.

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Matthew Levitt

IV. How is the U.S. targeted killing of Qassem Soleimani likely to affect Hezbollah's international activities and operations?

In recent years, Hezbollah grew into an expeditionary force deployed throughout the region — Syria, Iraq, Yemen — together with other Shi'a militias to further Iranian interests. An IRGC general referred to such forces as Iran's "Shi'a Liberation Army." In the wake of the Soleimani assassination, Hezbollah has already stepped in to help guide Iraq's various Shi'a militias, at least temporarily.

But even as its regional military responsibilities grew, and its domestic political position become more complicated, Hezbollah remained engaged in international terrorism with operational activities detected in recent years in Bolivia, Bulgaria, Canada, Cyprus, Panama, Peru, Thailand, Uganda, the U.S., and more.

The New York trial of convicted Hezbollah Islamic Jihad operative Ali Kourani, a self-described Hezbollah sleeper agent, offers critical insight into the conditions under which Hezbollah might carry out a terrorist attack. According to the FBI, Kourani said "there would be certain scenarios that would require action," including from the sleeper cell, such as if the U.S. and Iran went to war, or if the U.S. were to take actions targeting Hezbollah, Hassan Nasrallah, or Iranian interests.

The U.S. assassination of Soleimani clearly meets this threshold. As such, it is not surprising that since then Hezbollah has shifted its focus. "America is the number one threat," Nasrallah announced after the Soleimani hit, adding that "Israel is just a military tool or base."

Hezbollah still seeks to battle Israel, eventually. But the primary near-term objective of Iran and its proxies is to push U.S. military forces out of Iraq and the region. Nasrallah hinted at how Hezbollah could help realize this goal, boasting that "[t]he suicide attackers who forced the Americans to leave from our region in the past are still here and their numbers have increased."

Iran and its proxies will ultimately seek to avenge Soleimani's death by executing some type of reasonably deniable asymmetric attack. One likely scenario: recruiting operatives from Iranian proxy groups with non-Lebanese profiles. In August 2019, a Pakistani suspected of being a Hezbollah operative was reportedly questioned by authorities in Thailand. Or calling on Lebanese operatives who have lived abroad for several years, like the one arrested in Uganda in July 2019.

Kourani made this much clear: There are scenarios in which Hezbollah would use the preoperational surveillance it regularly collects to carry out an attack. Hezbollah will be patient, but will ultimately seek to avenge Soleimani's death.

Dr. Matthew Levitt is the Fromer-Wexler fellow and director of The Washington Institute's Reinhard Program on Counterterrorism and Intelligence. He is the author of Hezbollah: The Global Footprint of Lebanon's Party of God.

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Magnus Ranstorp

V. Has there been a shift in European thinking and policy toward Hezbollah, and how is it likely to affect the organization's future?

Historically, the EU's position toward Hezbollah has been soft-pedaling to avoid Hezbollah retribution on European soil or against UNIFIL troops in Lebanon. At the same time, the EU position is largely based on a recognition that Hezbollah is a formidable and influential political, social, and military player within Lebanon, where its powerful allies Iran and now to a lesser extent Syria provide it with considerable power-projection. The EU position is also aimed at avoiding another military conflict between Hezbollah and Israel as it is clear that Hezbollah has embarked on an aggressive military build-up, positioning over 100,000 missiles systems in Lebanon directed against Israel. As a result, the EU's risk-averse policy is largely about avoiding retribution by Hezbollah and its regional allies, as well as avoiding any moves that may destabilize the Lebanese government and lose diplomatic influence and leverage in Lebanon.

The EU's policy changed in 2013 when it designated Hezbollah's military wing as a terrorist entity as a direct response to its alleged involvement in the 2012 terrorist bombing in Burgas, Bulgaria. Five years earlier, the British government had outlawed Hezbollah's military wing in response to the organization's targeting of British troops in Iraq. This fictitious differentiation between the group's military and political wings allows the EU to continue its role as a diplomatic interlocutor and dialogue partner with Hezbollah.

Efforts to blacklist Hezbollah as a terrorist organization in its entirety are underway within EU. This change is largely due to intense U.S. pressure reinforced by targeted Israeli influence campaigns focusing specifically on Germany's role as a hub for Hezbollah's criminal enterprise. In December 2019, the German Bundestag passed a non-binding resolution to abandon the distinction it currently draws between Hezbollah's political and military wings. The British and Dutch governments have already decided on such a complete ban on Hezbollah. However, France opposes any

efforts to ban the group in its entirety, which it sees as unnecessarily provocative and counterproductive. As long as no EU-wide consensus is reached to ban Hezbollah entirely, the organization will be largely unaffected.

A game-changing scenario is possible, but it is entirely dependent on how and where Iran and Hezbollah decide to retaliate following the U.S. killing of IRGC-Quds Force commander Qassem Soleimani. Europe is bracing itself for the consequences or a further serious escalation in U.S.-Iranian tensions.

In the meantime, Hezbollah will work hard to continue to preserve its longstanding "resistance" status within Lebanon while it is mired in a war of attrition in Syria. Hezbollah is under severe financial pressure from U.S. targeted sanctions, which have strengthened its dependency on Iranian funding. Hezbollah continues to be in close lockstep with the agendas of its patrons Iran and Syria in the region, while at home it will closely safeguard its political gains in and control over the new Beirut government. If the socioeconomic fabric deteriorates and political stability plunges into internal conflict, then Hezbollah will be in serious trouble. For now, the party seeks stability and preservation of the status quo until Iran gives the green light for a new pathway or even conflict with U.S. and/or Israel.

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Bruce Riedel

VI. How likely is it that Hezbollah would avenge Qassem Soleimani through terrorism on U.S. soil or against Americans abroad?

Hezbollah is all but certain to retaliate against America for the drone strike that killed Iranian General Qassem Soleimani. Soleimani was a critical interlocutor between Hezbollah and Iran on the delivery of missile and rocket technology and expertise that is the centerpiece of Hezbollah's deterrence against Israel.

The organization has a history of striking far outside the region to respond to attacks on its leadership. Most notably in March 1992 Hezbollah and Iran blew up the Israeli Embassy in Buenos Aires, Argentina to retaliate for the Israelis taking out Hezbollah Secretary-General Sayed Abbas al-Musawi in February 1992. The attack shocked Washington for its demonstration of the Lebanese group's long reach.

There is every reason to believe Hezbollah has the capacity to strike inside the United States. Last December Lebanese immigrant Ali Kourani was sentenced to 40 years in jail in New York after the FBI persuaded the court that he had been a sleeper agent for Hezbollah for years. Kourani had entered the country in 2003. The prosecution said he had engaged in targeting sites for terrorist purposes.

Hezbollah has a long history of targeting Americans abroad from Beirut to Khobar. It also has a track record of getting personal, taking out individual Americans who are well known inside the U.S. national security bureaucracy. Hezbollah kidnapped, tortured, and murdered the CIA chief in Lebanon in 1984, William Buckley, who was close to then CIA Director Bill Casey. A carefully executed strike to target someone like Buckley, with whom I served, would be a riposte for Soleimani.

Of course, there are serious risks to striking inside the United States and/or against Americans abroad, especially senior government officials. The United States has enormous military assets in the Sixth Fleet in the Mediterranean that could be brought to bear quickly against Hezbollah targets. The Trump administration has demonstrated an unpredictable approach to national security challenges. Nonetheless, the history

of American combat operations in Lebanon is not encouraging. Dwight Eisenhower narrowly avoided a quagmire in 1958. Ronald Reagan was not so lucky and was driven out of Beirut after Hezbollah imposed dramatic casualties on the Marines.

The most effective way to deter military reaction is to take hostages. Hezbollah and Iran have been taking Americans hostage since Valentine's Day 1979. Seizing a group of American diplomats somewhere in the parts of Lebanon, Syria, or Iraq where Hezbollah operates would be a nightmare akin to the Iran Embassy hostage crisis that dominated the Carter administration's last years in office. The Soleimani operation was sparked in part by Donald Trump's apparent fear of a repeat of the 1979-81 debacle.

The Iranians and Hezbollah will carefully coordinate their retaliation. They are not under any urgency given the Iranian missile attack on American troops in Iraq that left more than 100 wounded. The Iranians have used their sophisticated missile capabilities to strike Saudi Arabia and the United States with no counter strikes in Iran.

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Randa Slim

VII. How is the eventual passing of Amal party chief Nabih Berri likely to affect the Hezbollah-Amal alliance and Hezbollah's future?

Since becoming Amal's leader in 1980, Nabih Berri has decimated the party's organizational infrastructure, mainly to eliminate any potential competitor for leadership. Amal became a tool to advance Berri's political ambitions and his family's enrichment. The party that fought Hezbollah in the 1990s no longer exists. Whether or not Amal as a party will survive Berri's passing will very much depend on Hezbollah's likely perception of any benefit in maintaining the duopoly that has ruled the Shi'a community since Hezbollah officially came on to the political scene in 1985.

The relationship between Hezbollah and Berri has been mutually beneficial. Berri has been a trusted interlocutor with regional and international governments with which Hezbollah did not have direct relations. He has also served as a mediator in political dealings between Hezbollah and other members of Lebanon's ruling elite. Hassan Nasrallah, Hezbollah's secretary-general, often refers to Berri as "our big brother." In return, Hezbollah has protected Berri's share in Lebanon's power sharing system and deflected criticism that has been growing for some time inside the Shi'a community against his corrupt practices.

The protests that began in October 2019 presented Hezbollah, perhaps for the first time, with a serious reckoning of the political costs of its alliance with Berri. Seen as embodiment of the corrupt political system that brought the country to the brink of economic collapse, Berri has become too much of a liability for Hezbollah. Yet there is no alternative figure inside the Amal party or the Shi'a community that can fulfill the same functions that Berri has had for Hezbollah. Jamil al-Sayyed, former head of Lebanon's General Security Directorate and a current member of Parliament known for his close ties with Hezbollah, is trying to position himself as that alternative. His close links with the Syrian leadership do not endear him to the anti-Assad political camp in Lebanon, however, making his road to replace Berri hard. Major General Abbas Ibrahim, the current head of the General Security Directorate, is a more

suitable replacement for Berri. He has used his current position to cultivate good relations with international and regional governments and with members of the Lebanese political class. He has stayed away from the limelight during the current wave of protests. When Hezbollah decides in the future they need a replacement for Berri, Ibrahim could be that person, assuming he has been elected to Parliament by then.

In the short term, the prospects of Hezbollah abandoning its alliance with Berri are minimal. The party needs Berri to serve as its eyes, ears, and voice in negotiations with international financial institutions on a plan to stabilize Lebanon's economy and restructure its debt. In the long term, Hezbollah's alliance with one of the poster boys of the anti-corruption campaign is not sustainable, primarily for intra-Shi'a considerations. Hezbollah's core constituency will no longer tolerate such an alliance. Berri's marginalization on the political scene might occur well before his eventual passing.

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Michael Young

VIII. Does Hezbollah stand to gain or lose from likely renewed Syrian influence in Lebanon?

The question harks back to a time when the Syrian presence in Lebanon was a defining factor in whether Hezbollah could pursue its agenda under the benevolent eye of the Syrian regime. In fact, the situation has completely changed since 2011, particularly in Lebanon. The junior partner in the country is no longer Hezbollah, therefore Iran, but Syria. Indeed, the uneven relationship was already in place in the aftermath of the Syrian military withdrawal from Lebanon in 2005. At the time Syria's Lebanese allies rallied around Hezbollah in order to protect themselves against a political order that, for a time at least, seemed dominated by Syria's Lebanese foes.

That is not to say, however, that Hezbollah and Iran will not give Syria a role to play in the country. Both realize that Syria is an absolutely vital piece in the regional structure they are trying to set up, which involves providing for geographical continuity from Iran to the Levant, along Israel's northern borders. The aim is to ensure that their access to Syria remains unhindered, and that Hezbollah has the means to rearm and bring in manpower from Shi'a militias in Iraq and beyond in any conflict with Israel. Therefore, asking what Syria can or cannot do in Lebanon is meaningless in that Iran is calling all the shots.

However, one issue that Iran and Hezbollah will certainly be watching closely is how Russia's influence factors into this situation. The Iranians do not trust Russia when it comes to Iran's and Hezbollah's margin of maneuver in Syria. The Russian military has refused to provide an air-defense shield against Israeli attacks directed against Iran and its allies in Syria. This raises questions as to whether in the event of a war with Israel their latitude to act through the country will be as great as they would like. The visit of Russian President Vladimir Putin to Damascus after the killing of the Quds Force's Qassem Soleimani was widely seen as a message that Moscow did not want Syria to be drawn into any U.S.-Iran confrontation. Would Putin say the same for a war between Hezbollah and Israel?

Today, Russia is playing a major role in Syria, one focused on rebuilding the Syrian state, as opposed to sponsoring nonstate actors, which Iran prefers. This is reassuring to Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, if only he can be sure that the Russians will keep him in power. That is why Hezbollah and Iran will want to guarantee that any Syrian influence in Lebanon does not, somehow, serve as a Trojan horse for Russian sway over the country. This is all the truer as some Lebanese parties and politicians appear to view Russia as a possible counterweight to Iran and Hezbollah. But for now Iran holds most of the cards and the nature of Syrian influence in Lebanon will be entirely on its terms.

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