

The Party of God and Its Greatest Satan

The 36-Year Confrontation Between Hezbollah and the United States

September 2020



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Executive Summary

Anti-Americanism has been a central pillar of Hezbollah's ideology since its inception in 1982, drawing inspiration from the founder of Iran's Islamic Revolution, Ayatollah Ruhollah Mousavi Khomeini. To Hezbollah, the United States is the "Greatest Satan" and the organization's prime enemy. As such, the group began its life by targeting Americans in Lebanon for attacks and kidnappings. Notoriously, it carried out the October 23, 1983, bombing of the U.S. Marine barracks in Beirut. That attack earned Hezbollah the infamous distinction of killing more Americans than any other terror group until al-Qaeda carried out the 9/11 attacks. Washington attempted several retaliations for the bombing. But a combination of bad intelligence, poor preparation of U.S. forces deployed to Lebanon, and underestimating Syria allowed Hezbollah to claim victory in this first—and violent—confrontation with the U.S.

Hezbollah toned down its anti-American activities in the 1990s. This was part of an effort to placate Syria, which had become Lebanon's official power-broker after the signing of the Taif Agreement and was seeking closer relations with Washington. But though the group adapted, its abiding enmity towards the U.S. never abated. The group continued to undermine American interests worldwide, clandestinely or via other terror organizations, including Al-Qaeda. As Hezbollah was laying the groundwork to operate globally, Washington was not focused on combating the threat from terrorist groups. Hezbollah, after all, gave the impression that it was focused exclusively on fighting Israel's occupation of south Lebanon and posed little threat to American interests at home or abroad. Aside from a few token measures, the U.S. largely ignored Hezbollah as it set about laying the groundwork—both in Lebanon and abroad—to guarantee its permanence.

The 9/11 attacks refocused America on the threat of terrorism and on Hezbollah. The Bush administration began tightening the screws on the group's finances, ramping up efforts that began under the Clinton administration. It also enacted the 2003 Syrian Accountability and Lebanese Sovereignty Restoration Act (SALSRA) and, along with France, co-sponsored the 2004 UN Security Council Resolution 1559, as part of efforts to clamp down on state-sponsorship of terrorism. These instruments called on Syria, Hezbollah's secondary sponsor, to end its 35-year occupation of Lebanon and on all militias in Lebanon to disarm. Syria finally withdrew in 2005, after the assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafic Hariri gave birth to the Cedar Revolution.

For a moment, Hezbollah was vulnerable, but the United States didn't take advantage. The Bush administration failed to simultaneously account for Iran, which remained free to act and provide unconditional aid to its terrorist proxy. The highly-adaptable Hezbollah rebounded and, with a string of assassinations and intimidation campaigns, quickly seized the upper hand in Lebanon again. It undercut the pro-Western Lebanese government at every turn and fractured the new pro-Western and democratic March 14 Alliance. It virtually relegated the Special Tribunal for Lebanon (STL) investigation into Hariri's assassination into irrelevancy, realizing that the tribunal would eventually point the finger at Hezbollah and Damascus. By launching the 2006 war against Israel, the group also tested the limits of U.S. support for March 14 by pitting Washington's commitment to Israel and Lebanon against one another. America's backing of Israel's highly destructive, but overall mismanaged and ineffective military

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campaign, demoralized the March 14 government and eroded its confidence in America support for Lebanese democracy. In the end, the U.S. approach failed both Israel and Lebanon, and allowed Hezbollah to reap the windfall.

Driving the point home, Hezbollah launched an armed takeover of Beirut in May 2008, after the government of pro-Western Prime Minister Fouad Siniora attempted to shut down its telecommunications network and fired the security chief at Beirut's international airport. With barely a response heard from Washington, Siniora's government conceded to Hezbollah and granted it the ability to obstruct any future government action at will.

The Obama administration began on the wrong foot when it came to Hezbollah. It initiated rapprochement with Syria in 2009, reversing most of the previous administration's punitive measures against Damascus, but sought nothing in return. The administration also signaled a desire for dialogue with Iran, while drawing down U.S. regional influence and armed presence. While Washington verbally reversed course on Syria after the start of its civil war, U.S. conciliatory measures towards Iran continued and picked up speed with the rise of ISIS and with attempts to secure a nuclear deal with Tehran. Hezbollah felt free to reassert itself in Lebanon and made considerable efforts to tighten its grip on the country, using it as a base to threaten U.S. regional interests.

However, not all American efforts to counter Hezbollah have been failures. Treasury and State Department sanctions have made the group's ability to raise funds more difficult, and continued U.S. aid to the Lebanese army is slowly but surely increasing its domestic credibility as the country's national defense force, obviating the need for Hezbollah and its so-called resistance. But these efforts are still in their infancy, and alone they are not sufficient to bring about Hezbollah's demise.

American actions during the past two decades were not comprehensive and fell short by assuming their nascent Lebanese allies could take on Hezbollah—entrenched in Lebanon for three decades and firmly backed by Iran and Syria—on their own. Time and again, the group was left room to maneuver and survive. To succeed against Hezbollah going forward, the U.S. commitment to its partners in the region and Lebanon must be firm and credible, just as Iran's is for Hezbollah. Washington must also engage Hezbollah in the 36-year-old "soft war" for the hearts and minds of the peoples of the region, particularly its Lebanese Shiite base. If the U.S. can win that fight, Hezbollah would be reduced to being a finite militia with little societal or political influence. The countdown to its disarmament and demise would begin.

Part I. The United States' Place in Hezbollah's Ideology

Section A. Khomeini and Fadlallah: The Ideological Sources of Hezbollah's Anti-Americanism

Ayatollahs Ruhollah Khomeini and Mohammad Hussein Fadlallah are the two main ideological influences on Hezbollah, including its enmity towards the United States. Khomeini and his successor as Iran's supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei—are Hezbollah's ultimate guides on all political and foreign matters, and Fadlallah—commonly misidentified as the group's "spiritual leader"—influenced the rank and file of Hezbollah's membership.¹

Anti-Americanism formed a central pillar of Khomeini's ideology, and he considered the U.S. the source of the world's problems. He dubbed the U.S. "the Great Satan," and considered it the prime enemy of humanity, particularly "dispossessed and oppressed peoples." To Khomeini, the U.S. was a greedy and deceptive imperialist power led by "unbelievers" who recognized no other people's right to live. It was thus a self-interested "terrorist nation" with "anti-human" policies. He claimed Washington aimed its most egregious behavior at Muslims, particularly Shiites, either directly or via proxies like the "wretched Jews" in Israel, making America the worst enemy of "Islam, the Qur'an, and Mohammad." As such, Khomeini considered death preferable to any relationship with Washington, and suspected that anything from the Americans—including aid or diplomatic treaties—was cover for domination. Khomeini stressed, however, that his enmity was directed at the American government, not its people—a distinction that would live on in Iran's Shia revolutionary ideology. He called on all Muslims to unite under a religious government and use every means—including the pen and rifle—to end U.S. hegemony.² Ali Khamenei, Khomeini's successor as Iran's Supreme Leader and *vali-ye faqih* (Islamic jurist who, according to one Shiite interpretation of Islamic law, exercises absolute guardianship over the people), has continued this negative assessment of America as part of the regime's official ideology.

Fadlallah held nearly identical—albeit often more polished—views on the U.S. He considered American influence malicious, and its support of human rights, democracy, and freedom as smokescreens for imperialism. To Fadlallah, the U.S. either used "barbaric violence" to further its interests, or orchestrated atrocities via its proxies. He therefore advocated confronting America, but with violence as a last resort. Despite some ambivalence, he ultimately supported—and sanctioned—attacks on American military and diplomatic targets in Lebanon. However, he claimed he only opposed the U.S. government, but "loved" and wanted to befriend its people, and therefore condemned the September 11 attacks. Ultimately, however, he waxed conspiratorial regarding 9/11's cause, calling the attacks a natural reaction to U.S.

¹ "We Don't Trust America," *Newsweek*; Qasir, the Open Letter, 145; Alagha, *Hizbullah's Documents*, 20; "Hizbullah's Identity and Goals (August 2004)" in Alagha, *Hizbullah's Documents*, 60; Azani, *Hezbollah: The Story*, 205; Jaber, *Hezbollah: Hezbollah: Born with*, 70–71.

² Algar, *Islam and Revolution I*, 47, 66, 139, 142, 183, 186–189, 197, 210, 214–215, 221, 224, 238, 257–258, 267, 277, 301–302, 305–306, 335; Khomeini, *Al-Kalimat al-Qesar*, <https://books.almaaref.org/book.php?id=305&phrase=%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%83%D9%84%D9%85%D8%A7%D8%AA>, <https://goo.gl/KwFw75>, <https://goo.gl/xNEJnM>, http://www.almaaref.org/books/contentsimages/books/alkalamat_alkesar/kalamat_kesar_emam_khumyne_1995/page/lesson9.htm#%D9%85%D9%88%D8%A7%D8%AC%D9%87%D8%A9%D8%A3%D9%85%D8%B1%D9%8A%D9%83%D8%A7; Khomeini, "American Plots against Iran."

foreign policy, and said the U.S. used the War on Terror—which he tried to undercut—for world domination. He only differed from Khomeini in encouraging dialogue with Washington.³

Section B. Hezbollah in its Own Words

Anti-Americanism permeates both Hezbollah’s ideology, as expressed in its still-binding 1985 Open Letter—the group’s founding ideological document—and in subsequent documents, propaganda, and statements by its leaders.⁴ Since its inception in 1982, the group has considered the United States the “Greatest Satan.”⁵ To Hezbollah, Washington is the “root of evil” (*al-munkar*) and the “greatest abomination of our era.”⁶ Its immense power is merely a tool to implement “historically unprecedented authoritarian subjugation mechanisms” aimed at dominating weaker peoples and turning the world into an American-dominated market, a goal Washington has been pursuing since the end of World War II. Globalization and military might—particularly the post-9/11 War on Terror—are the overt means of furthering U.S. neocolonialism.⁷ But the group claims Washington also employs subversive methods—including sowing internal discord, sponsoring international terrorism, igniting civil wars, and even exploiting its “slogans” of freedom, democracy and human rights—to subjugate and “pillage other societies.”⁸

Like Khomeini, Hezbollah claims this malicious American influence is particularly focused on the Middle East, in order to steal its resources, dominate the world market, and destroy Islam. To achieve these ends, Hezbollah claims that Washington foments all Middle Eastern conflicts, props up dictators, delegitimizes its “resistance movements,” and exports moral rot to sap the region’s “spiritual, civilizational, and cultural” energies and make it easier prey.⁹ Above all, however, the U.S. accomplishes this through its “forward base” Israel, the “most hideous” incarnation of American terrorism.¹⁰ In fact, according to Hezbollah, Washington masterminds all of Israel’s crimes and atrocities, making it—and not the Jewish state—the world’s “greatest terrorist state.”¹¹ Hezbollah therefore rejects all dialogue with the U.S., and prioritizes its confrontation with America over all other fights. It is also willing to ally with any of Washington’s foes—regardless of ideological or religious differences—to challenge its superpower status, which it claims is a threat to international security and Islam’s very existence.¹²

³ Woodward and Babcock, “Anti-terrorist Plan.”

⁴ al Mayadeen Documentaries, “وبعد | الشيخ نعيم قاسم,” YouTube video, <https://youtu.be/NJwWBqCdUz0?t=28m53s>; Jaber, *Hezbollah: Born*, 70–71; “We Don’t Trust America,” *Newsweek*, April 6, 2003, <http://www.newsweek.com/we-dont-trust-america-134479>, Qasir, the Open Letter, p. 145; Alagha, *Hizbullah’s Documents*, 20.

⁵ Alagha, *Shifts in Hizbullah’s Ideology*, 53. Hezbollah refers to the U.S. as “*al-Shaytan al-Akbar*,” which is better translated as “The Greatest Satan,” rather than the more commonly used “Great Satan.” The latter is, instead, a translation of the Farsi, “*Shaytan-e Bozorg*.”

⁶ The term recalls the second Umayyad Caliph, Yazid I, hated by Shiites for his role in the death of their beloved Imam Hussein Ibn Ali. See Saad-Ghorayeb, *Hizbu’llah: Politics and Religion*, 90.

⁷ Qasir, *Hizbullah bayn*, 19; Qassem, *Hizbullah: The Story*, 392.

⁸ Qasir, *Hizbullah bayn*, 174–176; Qassem, *Hizbullah: The Story*, 404, 439; “كلمة الأمين العام في اليوم العاشر من المحرم” (The Secretary General’s Speech on the 10th of Muharram), *The Islamic Resistance in Lebanon’s Audio Library* (Archived), March 13, 2003. (<https://web.archive.org/web/20160730021526/http://audio.moqawama.org/details.php?cid=1&linkid=22>), Direct Audio File (http://www.mediaspecial.org/sound/mediasave.php?filename=/hassan/real/2003/moharam13032003_day10.rm) at 36:10-36:26.

⁹ Qasir, *Hizbullah bayn*, 149, 177–179, 194; Saad-Ghorayeb, *Hizbu’llah: Politics and Religion*, 90, 104; Qassem, *Hizbullah: The Story*, 368–370, 392.

¹⁰ Qasir, *Hizbullah bayn*, 146–148, 150, 158, 178–179, 181, 278–280; Al-Manar, “Hezbollah’s Views and Concepts,” in Alagha, *Hizbullah’s Documents*, 57; “Hezbollah’s 1996 Parliamentary Elections Program,” in Alagha, *Hizbullah’s Documents*, 70, 74;

<https://youtu.be/ObgwOIUMoiU?t=33m27s>.

¹¹ “Hezbollah’s 1996 Parliamentary Elections Program,” in *Hizbullah’s Documents*, 74; Qasir, *Hizbullah bayn al-thabet walmutaghayyir*, 181; Ghorayeb, *Hizbu’llah: Politics*, 90–92, 94.; “كلمة السيد نصر الله في الليلة الأولى من محرم 2003-3-3” (Sayyed Nasrallah’s Speech on the First Night of Muharram 3-3-2003), *Hezbollah Media Relations* (Lebanon), Uploaded October 7, 2019 (<https://mediarelations-lb.org/post.php?id=2224>)

¹² Qasir, *Hizbullah bayn*, 150, 177, 179; Alagha, *Hizbullah’s Documents*, 31–32; “Hezbollah’s 1996 Parliamentary Elections Program,” in Alagha, *Hizbullah’s Documents*, 70; Saad-Ghorayeb, *Hizbu’llah: Politics*, 19–20, 106;

Hezbollah wants Lebanon to assume a forward role in this confrontation against the U.S., as part of the Iranian-led “Resistance Axis.”¹³ It therefore aims to foment Lebanese mistrust of all American initiatives and proposals, including Washington’s efforts to weaken Hezbollah, its call for the Lebanese Army to deploy to South Lebanon, or for the government in Beirut to provide its southern citizens with essential social services. Hezbollah claims that, while these initiatives are ostensibly aimed at strengthening Lebanese sovereignty, their real aim is to make Lebanon easier prey for Washington’s proxy, Israel.¹⁴ Hezbollah even alleges to have turned down multiple offers of generous aid by American officials, claiming they were mere ruses to pressure the group.¹⁵

Nonetheless, Hezbollah claims its enmity is directed only at America’s government and not its people. The group says it neither wants to destroy the U.S. nor use violence against its society as a first resort.¹⁶ As proof, it even claims to draw inspiration from the American Revolution—which it says embodied “the will of freedom and the longing for rights, justice and peace”—in its struggle against Israel, and supports Iran’s outreach efforts towards American society.¹⁷ Yet, statements by Hezbollah’s leadership contradict this claim. This includes Hassan Nasrallah praising the “D.C. Sniper” in an October 22, 2002 speech, and—along with his deputy Naim Qassem—saying Hezbollah’s conflict is against the U.S. as a country and civilization.¹⁸ The group also claims the exportation of U.S. culture—particularly into Muslim society—is a rot which fulfills “Satan’s project [of leading humanity astray] on the first day of creation.”¹⁹ Hezbollah also furiously rejects the image of America as a “paradise,” particularly for emigrants from the Third World, and presents U.S. culture and society in completely opposite terms: as essentially genocidal and racist—as evidenced by the treatment of Native and African Americans, respectively—and established upon the “law of the jungle.”²⁰

<https://arabi21.com/story/963131/%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A3%D8%B3%D8%AF-%D9%88%D8%AD%D8%B2%D8%A8-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%84%D9%87-%D9%88%D8%A5%D9%8A%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%86-%D9%83%D8%A7%D8%B3%D8%AA%D8%B1%D9%88-%D8%B4%D8%AE%D8%B5%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D9%81%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%AF%D8%A9-%D9%88%D8%B5%D9%85%D9%88%D8%AF-%D8%A3%D8%B3%D8%B7%D9%88%D8%B1%D9%8A>; “بين زمنين ... خمسينية الشهادة” (Che Guevara: Fiftieth Anniversary of Martyrdom... Between the Eras), *Al-Akhbar* (Lebanon), November 11, 2017 (<https://web.archive.org/web/20171119193307/http://al-akhbar.com/taxonomy/term/6744>); <https://www.mogawama.org/essaydetails.php?eid=18611&cid=199>; <http://archive.almanar.com.lb/article.php?id=436829>; Qassem, *Hizbullah bayn*, 376–377, 404–405, 409; “لعبة الأمم | حوار خاص مع الأمين العام لحزب الله السيد حسن نصرالله” (The Game of Nations: Special Conversation with Hezbollah Secretary-General Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah), *YouTube*, Al-Mayadeen Programs, January 3, 2018. (<https://youtu.be/SBoK4isY33Q?t=4977>)

¹³ Qassem, *Hizbullah: The Story*, 408–409.

¹⁴ Qasir, *Hizbullah bayn*, 146, 149, 154–55; Qassem, *Hizbullah: The Story*, 25, 170–173, 368–370, 406–409.

¹⁵ Qassem, *Hizbullah: The Story*, 404–405, 409; “لعبة الأمم | حوار خاص مع الأمين العام لحزب الله السيد حسن نصرالله” (The Game of Nations: Special Conversation with Hezbollah Secretary-General Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah), *YouTube*, Al-Mayadeen Programs, January 3, 2018. (<https://youtu.be/SBoK4isY33Q?t=4977>)

¹⁶ Saad-Ghorayeb, *Hizbu'llah: Politics*, 107; Qassem, *Hizbullah: The Story*, 411.

¹⁷ “Hezbollah’s Views and Concepts, issued by al-Manar on June 20, 1997,” in Alagha, *Hizbullah’s Documents*, 57; Qassem, *Hizbullah: The Story*, 107.

¹⁸ Law enforcement officials had yet to discover that John Allen Muhammad—aka the “DC Sniper”—and his accomplice Lee Boyd Malvo were behind the attacks. Hassan Nasrallah. “كلمة الأمين العام بمناسبة عيد مولد المخلص صاحب العصر والزمان (عج)“ (The Secretary-General’s Speech on the Anniversary of the Birth of the Savior, the Master of the Age and Time), *Hezbollah Media Relations* (Lebanon), October 22, 2002, Uploaded April 20, 2005 (<http://www.mediaspecial.org/sound/mediasave.php?filename=hassan/real/2002/almahdi22102002.rm>) (37:38-38:11); كلمة السيد حسن نصرالله: “تصريح الله في الليلة الأولى من محرم 3-3-2003” (Sayyed Nasrallah’s Speech on the First Night of Muharram 3-3-2003), *Hezbollah Media Relations* (Lebanon), Uploaded October 7, 2019

(<https://mediarelations-lb.org/post.php?id=2224>)

Ghorayeb, *Hizbu'llah*, 88–89; Jaber, p. 56;

¹⁹ Saad-Ghorayeb, *Hizbu'llah: Politics*, 104; “كلمة السيد نصرالله في الليلة الأولى من محرم 3-3-2003” (Sayyed Nasrallah’s Speech on the First Night of Muharram 3-3-2003), *Hezbollah Media Relations* (Lebanon), Uploaded October 7, 2019

(<https://mediarelations-lb.org/post.php?id=2224>)

referencing Qur’an 17:63–65. The Qur’an relates that Satan (*Iblis*) made a bargain with God upon being cast out of heaven that he would lead mankind astray.

²⁰ “لعبة الأمم | حوار خاص مع الأمين العام لحزب الله السيد حسن نصرالله” (The Game of Nations: Special Conversation with Hezbollah Secretary-General Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah), *YouTube*, Al-Mayadeen Programs, January 3, 2018. (<https://youtu.be/SBoK4isY33Q?t=4866>)

Part II. Hezbollah’s Anti-Americanism in Action in Lebanon and Abroad

Section A. Ideology in Action—Generally: Pragmatism and Gradualism

Hezbollah’s anti-American strategy has taken on many forms over the past three decades, but has constantly been characterized by both pragmatism and gradualism. Though the group may never compromise or alter its ideology, it is acutely aware of the limits of its own power, and has always been realistic about its implementation. This realism is even evident in the 1985 Open Letter, the uncompromising militancy of which masked a call for implementing Hezbollah’s ideological goals in incremental steps, both within Lebanon and beyond its borders.

Hezbollah realizes that the U.S. vast military advantage makes direct confrontation impossible. Its anti-American actions and attacks have therefore always been conducted from behind a veil of obscurity, plausible deniability, and even feigned moderation. Even when carrying out violent attacks against the U.S., Hezbollah has been careful to use cover names, secrecy, and deception, or even employ other terror groups as proxies. Hezbollah also realizes that America’s advantages prevent the country’s immediate defeat. It therefore views the war against the U.S. as a gradual and multi-generational endeavor. It believes final victory requires patience, and will come by employing all of its means—including military, financial, ideological, etc.—to attain successive and gradually accumulating gains, until changed circumstances or its own actions give it the upper hand over Washington.²¹ The group seemingly believes that the accomplishments of the region’s “resistance movements” have already started this process of gradual and perpetual decline of U.S. hegemony.²² As an example, Hezbollah views its aim of transforming Lebanon into the “graveyard for America’s project” and cementing it as part of Iran’s anti-American (*mu’adiyah*) axis as a first step toward creating Islamic and Arab unity to confront the United States.²³

Section B. Phase I: Violent Confrontation From the Shadows (1982–1990)

The first phase of Hezbollah’s confrontation with the U.S. coincided with the group’s rise, and was decidedly violent, consisting of attacks against American citizens—soldiers, diplomats, and civilians alike—and targets in Lebanon and abroad. The group employed guerilla methods to bridge its power gap with the U.S., with its leaders later justifying them as its “only way” of responding to “American aggression.”²⁴ It was a terrorist shadow war aimed at achieving Hezbollah’s expressed goal of expelling all Americans from Lebanon.

²¹ Qassem, *Hizbullah: The Story*, 439; Qasir, *Hizbullah bayn*, 179.

²² Qasir, *Hizbullah bayn*, 171; Alagha, *Hizbullah’s Documents*, 116; Al Jadeed News. “كلمة السيد حسن نصرالله في عيد التحرير.” (Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah’s Speech on Liberation Day). *YouTube*, 1:09:33. May 25, 2013. (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Oy5aFUMC-xk>).

²³ Qasir, *Hizbullah bayn*, 151, 153; Qassem, *Hizbullah: The Story*, 19–22, 376–377, 387, 389; “Hezbollah’s 1996 Parliamentary Elections Program” in Alagha, *Hizbullah’s Documents*, 74.

²⁴ Agence France-Presse, July 3, 1990, quoted in Azani, *Hezbollah: The Story*, 208.

Though Hezbollah opted for violence, it maintained anonymity for strategic reasons. It used aliases like “Islamic Jihad,” “Revolutionary Justice Organization,” and “Organization of the Oppressed of the Earth.”²⁵ To this day—and despite all evidence to the contrary²⁶—Hezbollah denies involvement in the kidnappings and bombings of U.S. targets in Lebanon.²⁷ It even claims to reject kidnapping on ideological grounds and to have interceded to secure the release of the American hostages.²⁸ This secrecy had a two-fold goal: to keep the Americans confused and, more importantly, to deny them the ability to effectively retaliate and damage or destroy the fledgling, vulnerable group.²⁹

1. Attacking America in Lebanon

Hezbollah’s first attack on Americans came on July 19, 1982, when three gunmen affiliated with its Islamic Amal faction kidnapped American University of Beirut (AUB) President David Dodge.³⁰ Dodge was then transferred to the Islamic Revolution Guard Corps (IRGC) in the Bekaa Valley, who took him to Iran’s notoriously brutal Evin prison for questioning in April 1983.³¹ Syrian intervention secured his release on July 21, 1983.³²

The group followed up on Dodge’s kidnapping with a deadly attack on the U.S. embassy in Beirut. Hezbollah exploited Washington’s errors to recruit Shiites, framing the organization as the force that would end the American occupation enabling Christian and Israeli abuses against them. One of these Shiites was Imad Mughniyeh, at that time personal bodyguard to Yasser Arafat, leader of the Palestine Liberation Organization and the Palestinian political movement Fatah. Mughniyeh defected from Fatah and turned to the IRGC in the Lebanese city of Baalbek’s Sheikh Abdullah barracks. The Guards asked him to gather intelligence on the U.S. Embassy in Beirut and plan an attack that would have maximum impact and leave no evidence of the perpetrator.³³ Mughniyeh complied, finalizing the plan in March of 1983 during a meeting with Iran’s ambassador to Damascus.³⁴ On April 18, 1983, the attack was finally carried out. On Iranian orders and with Syrian acquiescence, Islamic Amal operatives drove a van packed with two tons of explosives into the embassy, killing 32 Lebanese employees, 14 passersby, and 17 Americans.³⁵ The latter included Robert Ames, the CIA’s top Middle East analyst and Near East director, and most of the agency’s Beirut staff.³⁶ Intentionally or not, Hezbollah had decimated the U.S. intelligence capability in Beirut and much of the Middle East, as well as America’s ability to respond to this or future attacks by the group.³⁷

Hezbollah then bombed Beirut’s U.S. Marine barracks on October 23, 1983, using a truck laden with six tons of explosives. The attack, planned by Imad Mughniyeh and Mustafa Badreddine—two of

²⁵ Alagha, *Hizbullah’s Identity Construction*, 20; “Military Leaders Report ‘Arrest’ of Waite,” Reuters; Qassem, *Hizbullah: The Story*, 381–386.

²⁶ Saad-Ghorayeb, *Hizbu’llah: Politics*, 97-100, and Robert Fisk, *Independent* (London), April 21, 1996, quoted in Sankari, *Fadlallah: The Making*, 207.

²⁷ Al-Mayadeen Documentaries, “إسلاميون...وبعد | الشيخ نعيم قاسم”. Qassem: “Hezbollah as a hierarchical organizational structure and its resistance have no connection whatsoever with these bombings. Independent Islamic organizations, some of which latter joined Hezbollah and some of which didn’t, were the ones carrying out these attacks. Operationally, Hezbollah’s leadership did not take a decision regarding these kinds of acts, nor did it promote them or did it have foreknowledge, finding out about them later like everyone else.”

²⁸ Saad-Ghorayeb, *Hizbu’llah: Politics*, 96; Hijazi, “Group in Beirut Says.”

²⁹ Al-Mayadeen Documentaries, “إسلاميون...وبعد | الشيخ نعيم قاسم”.

³⁰ Ranstorp, *Hizb ’allah in Lebanon*, 88–89.

³¹ “Fate of an Educator,” *New York Times*; “A U.S. Educator,” *New York Times*.

³² Feldman, “U.S. Educator Kidnapped.”

³³ Bird, *Good Spy*, 331

³⁴ Bird, 332.

³⁵ Boykin, *Cursed is the Peacemaker*, 303; Solomon, *The Iran Wars*, 45; Friedman, “U.S. Beirut Embassy Bombed”; “The Bombing of U.S. Embassy Beirut,” Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training.

³⁶ Bird, *The Good Spy*, 294–309; Central Intelligence Agency, “Flashback: April 18, 1983,” Dilanian, “CIA Discloses Names.”

³⁷ Weiner, *Legacy of Ashes*, 453; Masters and Naughton, “2 Slain Hostages Buried.”

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Hezbollah's most notorious commanders—killed 241 Americans. The group would later describe the bombing as religiously-sanctioned “martyrdom,” and in their 1985 Open Letter as “chastisement”—perhaps for U.S. support for Saddam Hussein in Iraq's war with Iran.³⁸ Khomeini had already noted that Iran's quarrel in that war was with the Americans, not with Saddam's Iraq, which he claimed was Washington's puppet.³⁹

Hezbollah continued its attacks in 1984, gunning down AUB President Malcolm Herr on January 18, and kidnapping AUB engineering professor Frank Regier on February 11. Regier was rescued by the Amal militia on April 16.⁴⁰ By then, U.S. President Ronald Reagan had ordered a U.S. troop withdrawal from Lebanon, but Hezbollah—under the name “Islamic Jihad” (IJ)—continued targeting American civilians and diplomats in the absence of military targets, kidnapping two more Americans: CNN Beirut Bureau Chief Jeremy Levin, on March 7,⁴¹ and CIA Beirut Station Chief William F. Buckley on March 16.⁴²

Levin managed to escape from his captors. However, according to fellow inmates, Buckley was tortured and ultimately died in captivity from illness and neglect on June 3, 1985, though IJ claimed to have executed him on October 5, 1985, in response to an Israeli raid on Palestinian militants in Tunisia.⁴³ Hezbollah never returned Buckley's corpse, instead dumping it in a plastic trash bag on the side of the Beirut Airport Highway, where it was discovered by a Danish UN officer on December 27, 1991. His body, which coroners say was treated “with great disrespect” by his kidnapers, was finally laid to rest in the U.S. on December 30, 1991.⁴⁴

On May 8, 1984, Hezbollah took American Presbyterian minister Benjamin Weir hostage, and then on September 20, it bombed the U.S. embassy's new location in East Beirut, killing 23 people, including two Americans. Claiming responsibility as “Islamic Jihad,” it said the attack was fulfilling its earlier promise “not to allow a single American to remain on Lebanese soil.”⁴⁵ Then on December 3, the group kidnapped AUB librarian Peter Kilburn, executing him a year and a half later in response to U.S. strikes on Benghazi and dumping his bullet-riddled body in the Chouf mountains overlooking Beirut.⁴⁶

On January 8, 1985, Hezbollah, acting as “Islamic Jihad,” kidnapped Father Lawrence M. Jenco, the head of the Catholic Relief Services humanitarian agency, holding him for two-and-a-half years.⁴⁷ Then it took Associated Press Chief Middle East Correspondent Terry Anderson on March 16, releasing him on December 2, 1991, making him the group's longest-held American hostage.⁴⁸ “Islamic Jihad” then kidnapped and held David P. Jacobsen, AUB's hospital director, for six months, and in the meantime, abducted two more Americans—AUB agriculture professor Thomas Sutherland and Frank Herbert Reed, director of a Lebanese school in West Beirut.⁴⁹ Hezbollah accused Reed of using his education, marriage

³⁸ Qasir, *Hizbullah bayn*, 149; Razoux, *The Iran-Iraq War*, 274; Weiner, *Legacy of Ashes*, 453.

³⁹ Algar, *Islam and Revolution I*, 305.

⁴⁰ Friedman, “University Head Killed in Beirut; Gunmen Escape”; Friedman, “American Rescued.”

⁴¹ Weiner, *Legacy of Ashes*, 459; May, “U.S. Journalist Escapes.”

⁴² McFadden, “Ex-Hostage Casts Doubt.”

⁴³ McFadden; Priest and Boustany, “Buckley's Remains Identified.”

⁴⁴ Priest and Boustany; “Body Believed to Be,” Associated Press; Krauss, “2 Hostages.”

⁴⁵ Razoux, *The Iran-Iraq War*, 281; Kifner, “23 Die.”

⁴⁶ Weiner, *Legacy of Ashes*, 461; Hijazi, “Group in Beirut Says”; Kifner, “American is Freed.”

⁴⁷ Razoux, 281; Hijazi, “American Hostage Freed.”

⁴⁸ Hedges, “Last U.S. Hostage.”

⁴⁹ Kifner, “American Is Freed”; Boustany, “U.S. Hostage Freed.” “Islamic Jihad” initially claimed responsibility for kidnapping Reed, but later denied it had taken him. The organization that eventually released him claimed it was called “Islamic Dawn.” See: Jones, “Sister of Hostage Anderson”; Tuohy, “2nd U.S. Hostage Freed”; Sutherland, “Former Hostage Sutherland Says”; Johnson, “Ex-Hostage Joyfully Returns.”

to a Syrian, and even his conversion to Islam as a cover for espionage. Reed and Sutherland were released on May 1, 1990, and November 5, 1991, respectively.⁵⁰

Again operating under the moniker “Islamic Jihad,” Hezbollah’s next kidnapped Joseph J. Cicippio, AUB’s acting comptroller and another convert to Islam, on September 12, 1986. Cicippio was eventually released alongside Anderson, but during his captivity, the group—now calling itself the “Revolutionary Justice Organization” (RJO)—threatened to execute him on three separate occasions and broadcast it “on all screens in the world.” The last of these threats came in 1989, along with a demand that Israel release Sheikh Abdulkarim Obeid, an influential Hezbollah preacher and the imam of the south Lebanon village of Jibchit.⁵¹

On October 21, Hezbollah, calling itself RJO, kidnapped Edward A. Tracy, a 61-year-old American whose wanderlust took him to Lebanon, holding him until August 11, 1991.⁵²

On January 24, 1987, Hezbollah—using both its Islamic Jihad and Organization of Oppressed of the Earth cover names—abducted AUB professors Robert Polhill, Jesse Turner, Alan Steen, and Mithileshwar Singh (the latter an Indian citizen and U.S. permanent resident), four days after German authorities arrested TWA Flight 847 hijacker Mohammad Ali Hamadi. Singh was released on October 3, 1988,⁵³ Polhill on April 23, 1990,⁵⁴ Turner on October 22, 1991,⁵⁵ and Steen on December 3, 1991.⁵⁶ On June 17, 1987, Hezbollah kidnapped Charles Glass in its stronghold of al-Ouzai near south Beirut, this time using the heretofore unknown cover name Organization for Free People’s Defense.⁵⁷ Glass managed to escape from captivity 62 days later.⁵⁸

After Israel seized the group’s Sheikh Abdulkarim Obeid, Hezbollah kidnapped Col. William R. Higgins on February 17, 1988, using its Organization of Oppressed of the Earth alias.⁵⁹ Higgins would become the last American abducted by the group. Hezbollah is thought to have tortured Higgins before finally hanging him on July 31, 1989, and then released a video of his execution.⁶⁰ Lebanese police found Col. Higgins’ remains on December 22, 1991, alongside a Beirut street after an anonymous phone call, and handed him over to the U.S. embassy the next day.⁶¹ The American hostage saga finally came to an end when Col. Higgins was laid to rest in Quantico National Cemetery on December 31, 1991—the same day as Buckley.

2. Attacking the United States Globally

Hezbollah also targeted Americans living and working outside Lebanon during the 1980s. On December 12, 1983, over 90 minutes, three proto-Hezbollah operatives, including Mustafa Badreddine, and operatives of the Iran-backed Iraqi Shiite militia Da’wa executed six coordinated bombings in Kuwait. Retaliating for American support of Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein during the Iran–Iraq War, the attackers

⁵⁰ Hedges, “Freed U.S. Hostage Emerges”; Boustany, “Arsenic Traces Found”; Rosenthal, “Second American Freed.”

⁵¹ Hijazi, “Group in Beirut Says”; Hedges, “Cicippio Free”; “Top News Story,” ABC World News Tonight.

⁵² Hedges, “Freed U.S. Hostage Emerges.”

⁵³ Ibrahim, “Beirut Kidnappers Free American.”

⁵⁴ Ibrahim.

⁵⁵ Hedges, “Ex-Beirut Hostage.”

⁵⁶ Hedges, “American Captive is Freed.”

⁵⁷ “G15078702,” AP Archive.

⁵⁸ “American Flees Beirut Captors,” Associated Press; Cooper, “Newsman Charles Glass Relives”; “Beirut Hostage Is Reported,” Associated Press.

⁵⁹ “Top News Story: July 30, 1989,” ABC World News Tonight; Jaber, *Hezbollah: Born with*, 32–34.

⁶⁰ Hijazi, “Group in Beirut Says.”

⁶¹ “Body Found in Beirut,” *New York Times*.

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targeted the U.S. embassy and the living quarters for American employees of the military manufacturer Raytheon.⁶² One of the bombs collapsed the embassy's administrative annex, killing six—five Kuwaiti nationals and one of the perpetrators, but no Americans—and wounding 86.⁶³ The culprits also bombed the French embassy; the Shuaiba Petrochemical Plant, Kuwait's largest oil refinery and near the country's main water-desalination facility; Kuwait's international airport; and a state-owned power station.⁶⁴ (A seventh attack, on a post office, was thwarted.)⁶⁵ The terrorist attacks, which could have been among the Middle East's worst, ended up killing only seven people in total because of faulty rigging with the bombs used.⁶⁶

On April 12, 1985, Hezbollah bombed the Torrejon, Spain, restaurant El Descanso, frequented by American servicemen stationed at the nearby Torrejon Air Base. The attack—claimed by the “Islamic Jihad Organization”—collapsed the three-story building, killing 19, including 15 Americans.⁶⁷

Two months later, TWA Flight 847 was hijacked by four Hezbollah operatives: Mohammad Ali Hamadi, Hassan Izzedine, Ali Atweh, and Mughniyeh, whose fingerprints the FBI discovered in the plane's bathroom.⁶⁸ They held many of the plane's passengers—which included 85 Americans—hostage for 17 days. During this hostage-taking, the hijackers mercilessly and repeatedly beat Navy diver Robert Stethem. When they landed at Beirut International Airport, Hamadi shot Stethem in the head and then disgracefully dumped his body onto the tarmac.⁶⁹

Section C. Phase II: Hezbollah Adapts Its Attacks against the U.S. to the Taif Regime and *Pax Syriana* (1990–2001)

Hezbollah had to contend with an altogether different reality during the 1990s. The 1989 Taif Agreement ended Lebanon's Civil War. It also installed Syria as the country's undisputed dominant power, by explicitly legitimizing the Syrian military occupation of Lebanon under the excuse of maintaining Lebanese stability and preventing the country from posing any threat to Syrian security.⁷⁰ Headed by the shrewdly pragmatic Hafez al-Assad, Syria immediately set about eliminating all opposition to its absolute power over Lebanon. Shortly thereafter, the Soviet Union—Syria's patron—collapsed, leaving a unipolar American-dominated world order and Damascus seeking a new benefactor and improved relations with the West, particularly after the Gulf War.

Hezbollah sought to avoid Assad's wrath, lest it meet the fate of other Lebanese militias and of foes of Syria. Damascus had already violently suppressed the group during the 1980s for harming Syrian interests, and would do so again without hesitation if Hezbollah hindered Damascus' budding relations with Washington. Hiding behind aliases and pseudonyms would not suffice when it came to Syria. Hezbollah therefore halted its attacks against Americans in Lebanon in 1991. Instead, it scrupulously

⁶² Ranstorp, *Hizb'Allah in Lebanon*, 116–117; Levitt, *Hezbollah: The Global Footprint*, 35–37.

⁶³ “7 Dead in Kuwait,” Associated Press; “Car Bomb Kills 2,” Associated Press.

⁶⁴ Wright, *Sacred Rage*, 112–113.

⁶⁵ Levitt, “29 Years Later.”

⁶⁶ Wright, *Sacred Rage*, 112–113.

⁶⁷ “Restaurant Blast in Spain,” Reuters; Burns, “Spain Names Islamic Jihad.”

⁶⁸ Federal Bureau of Investigation, “Mohammed Ali Hamadei”; Federal Bureau of Investigation, “Hasan Izz-al-Din”; Federal Bureau of Investigation, “Ali Atwa”; O'Hern, *Iran's Revolutionary Guard*, 63.

⁶⁹ Levitt, *Hezbollah: The Global Footprint*, 54

⁷⁰ “The National Accord Document – The Taef Agreement.” The Lebanese Presidency. Accessed September 3, 2020. <http://www.presidency.gov.lb/Arabic/LebaneseSystem/Documents/TaefAgreementEn.pdf#page=8>

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confined its overt military operations to attacking Israel during the 1990s, activity tolerated by Assad because it gave him leverage over the Jewish state.⁷¹

Though Hezbollah continued to monitor American personnel in Lebanon, and maintained its ability to target them, it opted to continue its war against the U.S. via other means.⁷² It shifted the weight of the confrontation abroad, but also minimized the scope and exposure of its international terrorist attacks, while consolidating and expanding its global operational and logistical infrastructure.⁷³

During the mid-to-late-1990s, Hezbollah used Palestinian students in Russia to collect intelligence on American targets.⁷⁴ In Europe, in 1994, Germany issued a warning regarding the possible entry of a Hezbollah group sent by Imad Mughniyeh to attack U.S. targets.⁷⁵ In Southeast Asia, Hezbollah recruited locals to bomb U.S. naval vessels in Singapore, training them to ram small boats packed with explosives into the American ships—much like the bombing of the U.S.S. Cole in 2000.⁷⁶ In 1997, Hezbollah operatives were arrested while gathering intelligence on the U.S. embassy in Nicosia, Cyprus, while two years later, a Hezbollah network again in Southeast Asia was tasked with collecting intelligence on the American embassy and diplomats in Jakarta, Indonesia.⁷⁷ A year later, Southeast Asian authorities suspected Hezbollah was plotting to bomb U.S. embassies in Jakarta; Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia; and Makati City, Philippines.⁷⁸

Hezbollah also began developing its American-based networks during this decade, in order to raise funds through licit and illicit means, conduct counterintelligence on the Lebanese-American community, and give the group a “homeland option,” but only if an absolute need arose for it to carry out an attack on American soil.⁷⁹ Hezbollah appears to have already established a network in the U.S. by the early 1990s, with cells in New York, Boston, Los Angeles, Detroit, and elsewhere.

In late 1993, aided by one of these cells, Hezbollah plotted to assassinate then-U.S. National Security Advisor Anthony Lake, requiring his removal to multiple safe houses before the threat to his life abated in 1996.⁸⁰ According to a 1994 FBI assessment on the New York cells, many of their members had paramilitary training, including in explosives and firearms usage; reported back to the party’s leadership in Beirut; and were conducting counterintelligence on Lebanese-American law-enforcement informants. The FBI didn’t think these operatives were planning to imminently carry out an attack within the U.S., but should the need arise, “Hezbollah [had] the infrastructure present to support or carry out a terrorist

⁷¹ Harik, *Hezbollah: The Changing Face*, 194–195.

⁷² U.S. Department of State, *Patterns of Global Terrorism: 2001*, p. 81 (<https://2009-2017.state.gov/documents/organization/10319.pdf#page=81>), p. 57; U.S. Department of State, *Patterns of Global Terrorism: 1995*; U.S. Department of State, *Patterns of Global Terrorism: 1996*; U.S. Department of State, *Patterns of Global Terrorism: 1997*; U.S. Department of State, *Patterns of Global Terrorism: 1998*; U.S. Department of State, *Patterns of Global Terrorism: 1999*, 51; U.S. Department of State, *Patterns of Global Terrorism: 2000*.

⁷³ Azani, *Hezbollah: The Story*, 202

⁷⁴ Levitt, “Hezbollah: A Case Study.”

⁷⁵ Levitt, *Hezbollah: The Global Footprint*, 215.

⁷⁶ “Singapore: Hezbollah Tried,” Reuters; “Hezbollah Had Plans to Attack US, Israeli Ships in Singapore: report,” *Singapore Window* via *Agence France Presse*, June 9, 2002 (<http://www.singapore-window.org/sw02/020609a2.htm>); “Hezbollah Denies Plan to Attack US, Israeli Ships in Singapore,” *Singapore Window* via *Agence France Presse*, June 10, 2002. (<http://www.singapore-window.org/sw02/020610af.htm>)

⁷⁷ Levitt, “Hezbollah: A Case Study”; Levitt, *Hezbollah, The Global Footprint*, 134.

⁷⁸ Levitt, *Hezbollah, The Global Footprint*, 135

⁷⁹ U.S. Department of State, *Patterns of Global Terrorism: 1995*; U.S. Department of State, *Patterns of Global Terrorism: 1996*; U.S. Department of State, *Patterns of Global Terrorism: 1997*; U.S. Department of State, *Patterns of Global Terrorism: 1998*; U.S. Department of State, *Patterns of Global Terrorism: 1999*, 51; U.S. Department of State, *Patterns of Global Terrorism: 2001*, p. 81 (<https://2009-2017.state.gov/documents/organization/10319.pdf#page=81>), U.S. Department of State, *Patterns of Global Terrorism: 2000*.

⁸⁰ Benjamin and Simon, *Age of Sacred Terror*, 244.

attack.”⁸¹ Many of these U.S.-based cells also made contact with Hezbollah operatives in Latin America.⁸²

Hezbollah also continued its attacks on Americans and U.S. interests globally, but indirectly, through other terrorist groups or individuals. During this decade, Hezbollah also began developing ties with terrorist groups outside of Lebanon. Hezbollah cooperated with and trained Sunni Islamist organizations—including Hamas, Egyptian Islamic Jihad, and Al-Qaeda (AQ)—to attack foes in its stead, allowing the group to evade responsibility and retaliation.⁸³ Hezbollah cemented its relationship with Hamas when Israel expelled 400 Palestinian militants to Lebanon, where they honed their military skills in what they called “Hezbollah University.” When many returned home, they created an additional network Hezbollah could—and did—activate to cripple American peace initiatives whose success would threaten its existence by, in part, easing Israeli tensions with Syria and facilitating American-Syrian rapprochement.⁸⁴ This is in addition to Hezbollah’s preexisting relationship with Yasser Arafat’s Fatah, dating back to the early 1980s, when Imad Mughniyeh served in Force 17 and as Arafat’s personal bodyguard, and to the Iranian regime’s early friendship with the PLO.⁸⁵

Hezbollah’s relationship with al-Qaeda is perhaps its most significant. The two groups began cooperating in 1993, when Sudan-based AQ operatives visited a Hezbollah training camp in the Beqaa Valley. There, they received explosives, intelligence, and security training. They left impressed—particularly with the Party of God’s method of blowing up buildings—and taking instructional videotapes with them.⁸⁶ Eventually, a meeting was arranged in Sudan between Osama Bin Laden and Mughniyeh—most likely in late March or early April 1995—and Mughniyeh promised to train AQ’s fighters in exchange for weapons.⁸⁷ Bin Laden was reportedly impressed by Mughniyeh’s track record, the latter having orchestrated the bombings of the U.S. embassy and the Marine barracks in Beirut, which led to the U.S. troop withdrawal from Lebanon. These Hezbollah attacks convinced Bin Laden of the efficacy of suicide bombing—at the time not a practice used by Sunni Islamists or even other Arab terror groups—⁸⁸and that, for all its might, the U.S. had no appetite for conflict.⁸⁹ From that point on, Mughniyeh also became AQ’s link to Iran, and Tehran used Hezbollah to provide AQ with explosives and training.⁹⁰

Hezbollah facilitated some of AQ’s deadliest attacks against Americans during the 1990s. The first possible attack was the June 25, 1996 Khobar Towers bombings in Saudi Arabia, which killed 20 American airmen and a Saudi local. The CIA allegedly holds Mughniyeh ultimately responsible for the attack, but there is information to suggest the bombing was a joint operation by AQ and Saudi Hezbollah—the latter a local branch of Hezbollah trained by its Lebanon-based counterpart.⁹¹ The Sunni militants used expertise learned from Hezbollah, after Bin Laden dispatched his agent Ali Mohammad to receive explosives training from the group shortly after his 1995 meeting with Mughniyeh.⁹² When AQ, along with Egyptian Islamic Jihad, struck again in 1998—bombing U.S. embassies in Nairobi, Kenya, and Dar es-Salaam, Tanzania, killing 224 people, including 12 Americans—they again employed the

⁸¹ Levitt, *Hezbollah, The Global Footprint*, 150.

⁸² Levitt, 150–152.

⁸³ *United States of America v. Ali Mohamed*, Plea Hearing.

⁸⁴ Haberman, “Israel Expels 400”; Norton, *Hezbollah*, 82; Frankel, “Israel Troubled”; Hamzeh, *In the Path*, 69.

⁸⁵ Harik, *Hezbollah: The Changing Face* 170–171; Bird, *Good Spy*, 278; Luft, “Karine-A Affair.”

⁸⁶ *The 9/11 Commission Report*, 240.

⁸⁷ Bird, *Good Spy*, 339; Benjamin and Simon, *Age of Sacred Terror*, 127–128; *United States of America v. Ali Mohamed*, Plea Hearing; Wright, *Looming Tower*, 173.

⁸⁸ Wright, 186; Bird, *Good Spy*, 331.

⁸⁹ Wright, *Looming Tower*, 173.

⁹⁰ Bergman, *Secret War with Iran*, 223–224.

⁹¹ Freedman, *Choice of Enemies*, 304–305, 363.

⁹² Bird, *Good Spy*, 330, 339; *The 9/11 Commission Report*, 60.

training Hezbollah had given them beginning in 1993.⁹³

In October 2000, a senior Hezbollah operative—likely Mughniyeh—visited Saudi Arabia, planning to help AQ operatives there to travel to Iran in November. (That same month, two of the future 9/11 hijackers traveled to Beirut.)⁹⁴ Then, on October 12, AQ bombed the U.S.S. Cole in Yemen, killing 12 Americans. The attackers used a cone-shaped charge explosive and moldable high-explosives—Hezbollah’s trademark bomb utilized against Israeli forces in south Lebanon, and which it would later introduce to Iraqi Shiite militants.⁹⁵ However, it remains unclear whether Hezbollah built the bomb itself, or AQ had merely used the expertise learned from the Shiite group to do so.

Section D. Phase III: Sinking the U.S. in the Iraqi Quagmire and Wrestling Over Lebanon (2001-2011)

The September 11, 2001 attacks again forced Hezbollah to change tactics, responding to the U.S. “War on Terror” with a mixture of its now-signature pragmatism and militancy. Fearful of being caught alongside al-Qaeda in Washington’s crosshairs, Hezbollah reduced the exposure of its involvement in planned or executed attacks on Americans and, though it threatened retaliation against any American attack, stressed that it would only act in self-defense.⁹⁶ Like its Iranian patron, Hezbollah also distanced itself from AQ and denied their previous relationship. Hezbollah also actively tried to distinguish itself from the Sunni militant group as the “good Islamists,” a narrative it maintains today.⁹⁷ The group even issued a condemnation of the 9/11 attacks—in reality, a call for vigilance against the U.S. exploiting the terrorist incidents to its advantage, coupled with a half-hearted expression of sorrow over the loss of innocent American lives.⁹⁸ Hezbollah, however, did not change its ideology and claimed the U.S. was using “terrorism” as an excuse to spread its hegemony, leading it to demonize “national resistance” groups like Hezbollah.⁹⁹

1. Iraq

Even this limited moderation by Hezbollah was superficial. The group remained committed to its anti-Americanism and continued seeking out opportunities to harm U.S. interests. It found such an opening when the U.S. decided to invade Iraq.

To Hezbollah, the 2003 invasion was a threat, but also an opportunity. U.S. troops, on the warpath against terrorists and their sponsors alike, were now deployed on two of Iran’s borders and to Syria’s southeast, placing Hezbollah’s two patrons in danger. However, the invasion also put American forces within reach of Hezbollah, and the group turned the threat into an opportunity to target the U.S. with impunity. Several statements from the group’s leadership in the months and weeks preceding the invasion indicate the Party of God may have started planning to sink America into the Iraqi quagmire soon after Washington announced its intentions to invade.

⁹³ *The 9/11 Commission Report*, 68.

⁹⁴ *The 9/11 Commission Report: Final Report of the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, Authorized Edition, 2004), p. 240 <https://www.9-11commission.gov/report/911Report.pdf#page=257>

⁹⁵ Richard Sale, “USS Cole Update: Hezbollah Built Bomb,” UPI, May 20, 2001, <https://www.upi.com/Archives/2001/05/20/USS-Cole-update-Hezbollah-built-bomb/3089990331200/>.

⁹⁶ Hamzeh, p. 137

⁹⁷ Hamzeh, p. 137

⁹⁸ Hezbollah, “Hezbollah’s Statement Regarding the Attacks That Occurred in New York 16-9-2001,” Hezbollah Media Relations, July 10, 2019, <https://mediarelations-lb.org/post.php?id=174>.

⁹⁹ Alagha, *Hizbullah’s Identity Construction*, p. 85, 170.

In an October 22, 2002 speech—shortly over a month after U.S. President George W. Bush formally announced the need to take action against Iraq—Nasrallah “predicted” America’s invasion of Iraq would embroil it in an asymmetrical war and insurgency, and mark the “beginning...of the end of the United States’ control over the world.”¹⁰⁰ Again, a week before the invasion, Nasrallah promised the “peoples of the region” would greet the invading U.S. forces not with “roses, jasmine, rice, and fragrances, [but] with rifles, blood, weapons, martyrdom, and martyrdom-seeking operations.”¹⁰¹

In fact, only advanced planning can explain the speed of Hezbollah’s efficient entry into Iraq. It formed and deployed Unit 3800 to the country on the coattails of the invading American forces and immediately began organizing, training, and equipping Iraqi Shiite militias to carry out assassinations, kidnappings, and bombings on its behalf. Hezbollah provided these groups with free and generous aid, including weapons and funds, from the outset. The “Party of God” also dispatched its top military commanders, including Mustafa Badreddine and Imad Mughniyeh, to train the Iraqis and organize them into “Special Groups”—including Muqtada al-Sadr’s Mahdi Army—to confront U.S. forces. Hezbollah also indoctrinated these groups with its Iranian-inspired ideology, giving itself and Tehran a permanent foothold in Iraq.

The key figure in Hezbollah’s efforts in Iraq was Ali Musa Daqdouq, the commander of Unit 3800’s predecessor, Unit 2800. Dadqouq traveled to Iran in May 2006 to coordinate the Special Groups’ training program with the IRGC–Quds Force—the Guards’ external operations arm—and made periodic visits to Iraq. He trained them in carrying out various operations—including using mortars, rockets, and snipers, and to execute kidnappings and gather intelligence—and most importantly the usage of explosively formed penetrators (EFPs). These explosives, which Hezbollah had used to bedevil Israeli forces in south Lebanon, would become the primary killer of U.S. troops in Iraq from 2003 to 2011.¹⁰² Hezbollah’s tutelage also directly enabled one of these groups, Asa’ib Ahl al-Haq, to carry out the January 2007 attack on the Karbala Joint Provincial Coordination Center, kidnapping 5 U.S. soldiers—whom they later executed.¹⁰³

2. The Cedar Revolution

Hezbollah also found itself under American pressure at home. The April 2005 withdrawal of Syrian troops in the wake of Rafic Hariri’s assassination left the group vulnerable, exposed to its political opponents in Lebanon, and in the cross-hairs of nationalist Lebanese anger for supporting the Assad regime. Coupled with U.S.-sponsored efforts like the Syrian Accountability and Lebanese Sovereignty Restoration Act of 2003 (SALSRA), and UN Security Council Resolution 1559 calling on Syria to withdraw from Lebanon and Hezbollah to disarm, the Iranian proxy group was on the defensive. The pressure ratcheted up as the new pro-Western coalition, the March 14 Alliance, won a parliamentary majority in late May in Lebanon’s first parliamentary elections after the Syrian withdrawal, and formed a national unity cabinet under Prime Minister Fouad Siniora a month later.

¹⁰⁰ George W Bush, “President’s Remarks at the United Nations General Assembly,” The White House Archives, September 12, 2002, <https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2002/09/20020912-1.html>; “كلمة الامين العام بمناسبة عيد مولد المخلص صاحب العصر (عج) والزمان (The Secretary-General’s Speech on the Anniversary of the Birth of the Savior, the Master of the Age and Time),” *Hezbollah Media Relations*, October 22, 2002, (<http://www.mediaspecial.org/sound/mediasave.php?filename=/hassan/real/2002/almahdi22102002.rm>, <https://web.archive.org/web/20171023161134/https://audio.moqawama.org/details.php?cid=1&linkid=189> (41:58-43:55)

¹⁰¹ Hassan Nasrallah, “Ashoura Speech: Speech of Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah on the Tenth Day of Muharram,” *Hezbollah’s Media Relations*, March 13, 2003 (<https://www.mediarrelations-lb.org/article.php?id=2284&cid=124#.WnHrCZM-rOQ>)

¹⁰² David Daoud, “PMF Deputy Commander Muhandis Details Hezbollah Ops in Iraq,” *Long War Journal*, January 9, 2017 (<https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2017/01/pmf-deputy-commander-muhandis-details-hezbollah-ops-in-iraq.php>).

¹⁰³ David Daoud, “Hezbollah Fighters Train Iraqi Shiite Militants Near Mosul,” *Long War Journal*, November 6, 2016. (<https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2016/11/hezbollah-fighters-train-iraqi-shiite-militants-near-mosul.php>)

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In December, the Siniora government further cornered the group by requesting international assistance in investigating Hariri's assassination. Already on the defensive, Hezbollah now had to worry that its involvement in murdering the late prime minister would be exposed. The government's request culminated in the UN Security Council's adoption of Resolution 1664 on March 29, 2006, establishing an international tribunal to investigate Hariri's murder.¹⁰⁴

All the while, the Siniora government was engaged in two other American-backed efforts which posed a threat to Hezbollah. The first was laying the groundwork for the so-called "Beirut-1" conference to secure international financial aid to help Lebanon pay off its debts. This could have enabled the Lebanese state to begin acting as a credible provider for its citizens, threatening to siphon away much of Hezbollah's popular support. The second effort would have seen the U.S. mediate the dispute between Lebanon and Israel over the Shebaa Farms, with Washington seemingly leaning in Beirut's favor on the issue. Had Washington succeeded in resolving the dispute, Hezbollah would have lost its last excuse to bear arms. Furthermore, securing an Israeli withdrawal from Lebanese territory via diplomatic means would undercut Hezbollah's entire "resistance" narrative, that Lebanon could only be liberated from Israel by force of arms. Either way, the Party of God would have found itself superfluous.

Hezbollah lashed back, with both violence and political maneuvering. But rather than confronting Washington head-on, the Shiite organization took on America's Lebanese allies, once again opting for a more circuitous approach that would achieve the group's ends, but without incurring an American backlash. It exploited political disagreements in the March 14 camp to woo the opportunist Michel Aoun and his Free Patriotic Movement over to its side, enabling it to obstruct the government at almost every turn. A string of assassinations also targeted March 14 officials and other Lebanese security officials involved in the investigation of Rafic Hariri's murder.

The penultimate blow to U.S. efforts in Lebanon came, however, from the unlikely of actors: Israel. On July 12, 2006, Hezbollah launched a bombardment of northern Israel as a cover for a kidnapping operation of two IDF soldiers. The cross-border raid resulted in a 34-day war between Israel and Hezbollah that ended in a stalemate, but left Lebanon devastated in its wake.¹⁰⁵ Several reasons have been given for Hezbollah's decision to carry out the precipitous attack. The group itself claims that it was to secure the release of Lebanese prisoners in Israeli jails, including Samir Quntar. Others see an attempt to distract international attention from Iran's nuclear program. However, one overlooked reason may have been the domestic situation in Lebanon itself. Hezbollah may have launched the war to pit U.S. commitments to a March 14-led Lebanon and to Israel against one another, thus demoralizing Hezbollah's Lebanese opponents when Washington ultimately sided with Jerusalem.

Hezbollah essentially used the IDF to weaken the country on its behalf. The group provoked Israel into war at a particularly sensitive time in Lebanese politics, when there was disagreement on virtually all issues, including how to go about economic recovery. Lebanon had just begun economic recovery, and was preparing for the Beirut-1 conference—to secure international financial aid to help Lebanon pay off its debts—which had been delayed several times for political reasons, including by Hezbollah allies.¹⁰⁶ The U.S. had signaled its backing of and readiness to participate in the conference. At the end of the war, however, Lebanon was devastated and its economic recovery and development were set back 15 years,

¹⁰⁴ "Security Council Resolution 1664 (2006)," United Nations, March 29, 2006. [http://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=S/RES/1664\(2006\)](http://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=S/RES/1664(2006)); "About the STL," Special Tribunal for Lebanon, accessed September 1, 2020, <https://www.stl-tsl.org/en/about-the-stl>.

¹⁰⁵ Siniora, Fuad. "The Israeli Aggression and Political Resistance." Fuad Siniora's Official Website, July 26, 2006. <http://www.fuadsiniora.com/politicalresistance>.

¹⁰⁶ "Economic/Lebanon/Beirut Conference of Aiding Countries." Saudi Press Agency, July 8, 2006. <https://www.spa.gov.sa/374170>.

mooting the gathering. Hezbollah and its allies continued to obstruct Lebanon’s political recovery, opposing the “Paris-3” successor conference to Beirut-1.¹⁰⁷

The Israeli campaign’s failure shattered Washington’s vision of the war heralding the beginning of a new and more democratic Middle East. Hezbollah, while battered, reemerged to rearm and continued threatening America’s regional interests and allies. The war also torpedoed any U.S. effort to resolve Lebanese-Israeli differences via diplomacy, thus reinforcing Hezbollah’s narrative that only resistance – and specifically its brand of resistance—could liberate Lebanese lands.

After the war, Hezbollah continued forward, and its actions drove home the message that America would not aid Lebanon or its pro-Western allies, no matter how far the group went. The pressure continued in December 2006 when Hezbollah organized a sit-in in downtown Beirut, aimed at toppling the U.S.-backed Siniora government and forming a national unity government that would give Hezbollah and its political allies control over Beirut’s decision-making. The pressure culminated in an armed putsch in Beirut in May 2008, after the Siniora government fired Beirut International Airport’s pro-Hezbollah security chief and moved to shut down the group’s telecommunications network. The result was the Doha Agreement of May 21, 2008, in which Lebanon’s pro-Western forces capitulated to Hezbollah’s demands. All the while, Washington gave its Lebanese allies little more than words of encouragement. Three years later, Hezbollah again undercut Lebanon’s U.S.-backed political forces, this time from within the government. On January 12, 2011, in a move calculated to humiliate Prime Minister Saad Hariri, while he was meeting with U.S. President Barack Obama, the group spearheaded the collapse of his national unity government over the Special Tribunal for Lebanon investigation into his father Rafic’s murder.

3. Continued International Terrorism Against the United States

Though Hezbollah reduced its international terror signature, it didn’t entirely abandon its attempts or readiness to target American assets abroad. In 2007, the U.S. intelligence community assessed that Hezbollah would likely consider attacking the U.S. homeland “over the next three years” if it perceived America as directly posing a threat to Iran or the group.¹⁰⁸ In 2009, Azerbaijan sentenced two Lebanese citizens, Ali Karaki and Ali Najmeddin, to 15 years in prison for preparing to attack the U.S. and Israeli embassies in Baku. During questioning, the duo confessed that they were in the final stages of preparing the attack, intended to avenge Imad Mughniyeh’s assassination by the U.S. and Israel.¹⁰⁹

Section E. Phase IV: The Arab Spring, ISIS, and the JCPOA

The chaos of the Arab Spring erupting across the Middle East initially provided Hezbollah with a much-needed respite. The world’s attention was focused on the political upheaval sweeping the region, and away from Hezbollah and its patron Iran. That was particularly so with the U.S., which, under President Barack Obama’s administration, had decided to disengage from the Bush presidency’s Middle Eastern entanglements and instead conduct outreach to foes, including Tehran.

¹⁰⁷ Al-Ghosh, Fadi. “Siniora: Lebanon Will Not Return to Guardianship and Political Opposition Doesn’t Want Stability.” *Okaz*, January 22, 2007. <https://www.okaz.com.sa/article/76167/?page=1>.

¹⁰⁸ “National Intelligence Estimate: The Terrorist Threat to the US Homeland.” National Security Archive of George Washington University, July 2007. <https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/nukevault/ebb270/18.pdf>.

¹⁰⁹ Rotella, Sebastian. “Alleged Hezbollah Plot in Azerbaijan.” *Los Angeles Times*. May 30, 2009. <http://articles.latimes.com/2009/may/30/world/fg-shadow30>; “Azerbaijan Jails 2 Lebanese for Israel Embassy Plot.” *Ynetnews*. June 14, 2011. <https://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0.7340.L-3785792.00.html>.

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Initially, Hezbollah vocally backed the sweeping popular call for change and the downfall of the Arab world's autocratic regimes. It particularly voiced support for the removal of Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak. He was one of America's closest regional allies and the leader of the one Arab nation with sufficient cultural, political, and military power to challenge Iran, or at least keep it at bay. However, it wasn't until the upheaval reached the seat of its sponsor in Damascus that Hezbollah made an about-face. The collapse of the Assad regime in Syria posed an existential threat for Hezbollah and threatened Iran's regional strategic interests, and therefore, keeping Assad in power took precedence over all the group's other activities, including its war with the U.S.¹¹⁰

The group again turned a threat into an opportunity, exploiting the Syrian Civil War and the rise of Sunni-extremism-inspired terrorist groups to effectively conquer Syria, just as Iran was doing in Iraq via its other proxies. While during this period Hezbollah deprioritized its anti-American activities—busy as it was effectively fighting for its existence in Syria—it still found ways to undercut the U.S. It accused Washington and its regional allies of creating, equipping, and propping up ISIS. True to its propaganda that the U.S. is the source of any and all dangers to Hezbollah, the group framed any American diplomatic or military intervention in the region—particularly against Assad or Iran—as a cover for supporting the so-called Islamic State.¹¹¹ By the same token, it painted all factions in the Syrian Civil War opposed to Assad as *takfiris*—terrorists no different from ISIS or the Nusra Front, an AQ offshoot.

Meanwhile, the group continued posing as the “good Islamists,” having common-cause with the West in fighting the peril of ISIS, even as it accused the U.S. of propping up the extremist group. This served, again, to keep Hezbollah (and Iran's other clones) outside of the international dragnet to “degrade and defeat” Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi's self-described caliphate. As it did this, Hezbollah directly and indirectly continued undercutting America's regional interests and allies. It continued its rearmament and preparations for a future war with Israel, and backed the Iranian-supported Houthi rebels in Yemen to squeeze Saudi Arabia and seize the strategic Bab al-Mandeb straits. Hezbollah also tightened its grip on Lebanon by weakening the group's pro-Western Lebanese foes and forcing them to make one concession after another, including electing Hezbollah's choice of president and including support for its resistance activities in the new Hariri government's policy statement.¹¹²

Section F. The Soft War (1982-Present)

Throughout its 36-year existence, Hezbollah has altered the form of its confrontation with the U.S. to suit the times and circumstances. However, one constant throughout these almost-four decades has been the “soft war” waged by the group against Washington, as part of employing all means to combat American hegemony. The soft-war goal is multifold: dissuade Lebanese Shiites from emigrating to the U.S., increase their suspicion of any American initiative or proposal for Lebanon or the region, and prevent them from taking any form of aid from Washington.

Hezbollah's soft-war tools span a spectrum of activities. Per its own admission, the group “raises its youth to be hostile to the U.S.” through its schools, scouts and youth programs.¹¹³ Its Cultural Committee

¹¹⁰ Daoud, David. “A Donald Trump Anti-ISIS Campaign That Spares Assad Would Only Empower Hezbollah.” Newsweek, December 6, 2016. <https://www.newsweek.com/trump-anti-isis-campaign-spare-assad-will-only-empower-hezbollah-528559>.

¹¹¹ Qassem, *Hiszbollah*, p. 438

¹¹² Daoud, David. “Hezbollah Has Effectively Won the Lebanese Presidency.” Newsweek, November 13, 2016. <https://www.newsweek.com/hezbollah-won-lebanese-presidency-520317>.

; Daoud, David. “Hezbollah's Latest Conquest: Lebanon's Cabinet.” Newsweek, January 12, 2017. <https://www.newsweek.com/hezbollahs-latest-conquest-lebanons-cabinet-541487>.

¹¹³ Saad-Ghorayeb, *Hisbu'llah: Politics and Religion*, p.88, quoting *Al-'Ahd*, 10 Safar 1406; Levitt, p. 160.

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mobilizes Hezbollah-affiliated professionals to resist American educational and cultural influences.¹¹⁴ The group also uses music to create anti-American sentiment among Lebanese Shiites. It has produced several anti-American *anasheed* (religio-political songs set to martial tunes). These include “Allahu Akbar, America is the Greatest Satan”—encouraging anti-U.S. resistance as “path of the free [peoples]” and defeating America “with death”—and “America, We Only Fear the Lord of Lords”—describing the U.S. as a “force for injustice, an army of occupying invaders,” and calling it the mother and symbol for terrorists.¹¹⁵ The video additionally describes America as “the land of holocausts, not [pleasant] fragrances or flowers,” and a usurper whose land is filled not with “parks, but fire, death, and graves.”¹¹⁶ The song is overlaid onto a video of American atrocities across the world—including Vietnam—and of Israeli attacks as well.¹¹⁷

Through programs, news reports, and cartoons, Hezbollah’s media – including Al-Manar and Al-Ahed – routinely highlight U.S. domestic social tensions and ills. These include crime and murder, racial tensions, income disparity, social inequality and unemployment, environmental issues, and conspiracies about American foreign policy moves and intentions. Al-Manar even hosted a series entitled “Poison and Honey,” devoted to highlighting Western media’s alleged insidious attempt to distort Islam.¹¹⁸

The group’s leadership echoes much of the same messages in their statements and speeches, including claiming the U.S. fosters and protects ISIS, was behind the bombing of Shiite shrines in Iraq,¹¹⁹ pushed Israel against its will into launching the 2006 Lebanon war,¹²⁰ and attempted to assassinate Sheikh Fadlallah.¹²¹ In fact, Nasrallah often devotes part of his speeches—especially during Islam’s second-holiest month, *Muharram*—to highlighting American social ills.¹²²

Part III. America Responds: The History, the Mistakes, and the Successes

Section A. Pre-9/11

1. Ronald Reagan (1981–1989)

The United States first confronted Hezbollah during Ronald Reagan’s presidency. Washington had first deployed forces to Lebanon after the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in June 1982. U.S. forces arrived in the country to oversee the withdrawal of Yasser Arafat and his Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) to

¹¹⁴ Hamzeh, *In the Path of Hizbullah*, p.67

¹¹⁵ General Mohaymen. “Allahu Akbar, America is the Greatest Satan.” *YouTube*, 03:17. January 23, 2020. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZUHY-mM95_k.

¹¹⁶ Various Artists – Topic. “We Don’t Fear America.” *YouTube*, 03:37. December 22, 2015. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=evNZOGIVsqc>

¹¹⁷ Various Artists – Topic. “We Don’t Fear America.” *YouTube*, 03:37. December 22, 2015. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=evNZOGIVsqc>

¹¹⁸ Ghorayeb, p. 105

¹¹⁹ Alagha, *Shifts*, p. 56

¹²⁰ Qassem, p. 36, claiming to cite Israel’s post-2006 war Winograd Commission Report. Author’s review of the Winograd Report found no mention of this occurring. See: “Commission to Investigate the Events of the 2006 War in Lebanon,” *The Winograd Commission*, January 2008 (<https://web.archive.org/web/20170630220306/http://www.nrg.co.il/images/news/doah.pdf>).

¹²¹ Azani, p. 208, quoting Reuters, March 13, 1988 ; See: Qassem, p. 183, misquoting article by Washington Post’s Bob Woodward, and not mentioning CIA’s subsequent denials here: Woodward, Bob, and Charles R. Babcock. “Anti-Terrorist Plan Rescinded After Unauthorized Bombing.” *The Washington Post*. WP Company, May 12, 1985. https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1985/05/12/anti-terrorist-plan-rescinded-after-unauthorized-bombing/bd2a869b-5b92-4efa-9f3c-740388e0b847/?utm_term=.e3170aa7d79e.

; Babcock, Charles R., and Bob Woodward. “CIA Denies Part in Bombing.” *The Washington Post*. WP Company, June 23, 1985.

https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1985/06/23/cia-denies-part-in-bombing/49955967-2ce9-4b0b-bedc-540ba39f9026/?utm_term=.b96f83a6d06b.

¹²² Norton, *Hezbollah*, 68; Jaber, *Hezbollah: Born with a Vengeance*, p. 58

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Tunisia, and departed shortly thereafter. However, soon after, the Lebanese government formally requested that America return, following the assassination of President-Elect Bachir Gemayel, Israel's violent invasion of West Beirut, and the massacre at the Sabra-Chatila Palestinian refugee camp by Gemayel's loyalists.

The U.S. complied, sending a small contingent of 1,200 lightly-armed Marines as part of a multinational peacekeeping force meant to oversee the withdrawal of all foreign forces from Lebanon, and the restoration of Lebanon's complete territorial sovereignty. However, Washington reentered the Lebanese fray ill-equipped to deal with the country's complex problems. Hezbollah fully exploited this dynamic to carry out a string of attacks against American personnel and assets, while suffering virtually no consequences.

Several factors contributed to giving Hezbollah the upper hand. The U.S. deployed its forces to Lebanon with little understanding of the country's political and social divisions. In fact, particularly between 1984 and 1987—a critical moment in Hezbollah's rise—Washington felt “confused” about Lebanon, and placed the country low on its list of priorities.¹²³ Hezbollah and Iran exploited this American confusion to make headway against Washington's interests in Lebanon, carrying out several hard-hitting attacks against American targets and interests during the early 1980s.¹²⁴ Further, U.S. forces in Lebanon were not equipped or trained to achieve victory in their mission.

The U.S. did not even begin to attempt to push back against Hezbollah until the *second half* of the 1980s—partially by pressuring Iran and Syria and cutting off the group's funding and support sources, and partially by retaliating militarily.¹²⁵ However, a lack of intelligence made Washington's military responses largely ineffective or counterproductive. By the time Hezbollah announced its existence with its Open Letter on February 16, 1985, the group had already inflicted a string of political and military defeats on the United States. Finally, the Reagan administration failed to understand and counter Syria's influence in Lebanon, which had already begun using Hezbollah to foil American interests in Lebanon, albeit on a low-key level.

Misreading Lebanon: The United States as the Enemy of Islam and the Shiites

Hezbollah exploited America's haphazard deployment into Lebanon, and ignorance of the country's intricate sectarian patchwork and the complexities of the Civil War, to paint Washington as a self-interested enemy of Islam and Lebanon's Muslims. The U.S. deployment was an effort to prop up an ally it thought in good faith to be the legitimate government of Lebanon.¹²⁶ However, the new Lebanese President Amine Gemayel, Bachir's older brother—was less a consensus president and more a sectarian war chief with little popular legitimacy beyond his followers. By backing him, Washington appeared to be siding with Gemayel's Maronite Christians against the Muslims in Lebanon's Civil War.¹²⁷ Continued American missteps only reinforced this view. For example, though the Marines were initially ordered to be strictly neutral, over time they increased support for the government and its forces.

Beginning in November 1982, the Marines' mandate was extended to provide non-combat support to Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) operations, including providing weapons and training. By February 1983,

¹²³ Elie A. Salem, *Violence and Diplomacy in Lebanon*, p. 242-243 (New York: I.B. Taurus Publishers, 1995).

¹²⁴ Salem, p. 242.

¹²⁵ Azani, p. 202

¹²⁶ Jaber, p. 79

¹²⁷ Robert O. Freedman, *The Middle East After the Israeli Invasion of Lebanon*, p. 79; Jaber, p. 79

they were engaging in joint patrols and checkpoints, which sometimes forced the Americans into direct armed conflict with other groups and militias—like Walid Jumblatt’s Druze Progressive Socialist Party—in order to help Gemayel’s LAF.¹²⁸ Exacerbating matters, Gemayel’s loyalists—the Phalangists—were murdering Muslims in areas of Beirut under the nominal control of U.S. Marines, a fact which Hezbollah would exploit to claim Washington was ultimately responsible for “encourag[ing] the Phalangists’ crimes.”¹²⁹

Beirut’s Shiites—including future Hezbollah military chief Imad Mughniyeh—who had suffered from the Christian militia attacks also blamed the U.S. and were receptive to Hezbollah’s anti-American message.¹³⁰ A clear lack of separation between American and Israeli positions also opened the U.S. to charges of complicity with the IDF and its actions, a charge exacerbated by U.S. pressure on Gemayel’s Lebanon to sign a peace agreement with Israel on May 17, 1983. At the time, few Lebanese had any appetite for a peace deal with the Israelis, particularly one which did not call for Israel’s full withdrawal from Lebanon. Syria exploited this to dig in its position, and Hezbollah pounced on the opportunity to present America—particularly to the Shiites—as serving Israel’s interests at the expense of Lebanon’s.

Attempts by U.S. forces to restrain the worst excesses of their allies—including the Israelis, and their Phalangist proxies—were *ad hoc* and divorced from an overall policy. Their efficacy was therefore limited, and often the Marines had little choice but to stand by even as they were subjected to stray fire from the IDF or intentional abuses from Israeli soldiers.¹³¹

Mission Impossible: Victory Was Not an Objective

The Marines’ deployment had an inherent weakness from the outset: they would be immediately withdrawn if attacked.¹³² Hezbollah realized this, and used it to its advantage. The group was not killing Americans for the sake of it, but calculated correctly that Washington could be prompted to act in a certain way if the costs of its current policies became too high. Hezbollah wanted U.S. forces and citizens out of Lebanon as a preliminary step towards forcing an American global retreat.

Washington also sent the Marines into a war for which they were unprepared, according to a Department of Defense (DOD) commission convened in December 1983. The commission stated that American armed forces overall were ill-equipped to fight a counter-terror war, and the Marine contingent in Lebanon was “not trained, organized, or supported to deal effectively with the terrorist threat.” It recommended the “development”—indicating its near absence at the time—of counterterrorism “doctrine, planning, organization, force structure, education, and training necessary.”¹³³ But by this time, Hezbollah had already carried out several attacks against U.S. targets in Lebanon, and it took an additional 11 months for the Pentagon to even begin correcting “some of the deficiencies.”¹³⁴

¹²⁸ Robert O. Freedman, *The Middle East After the Israeli Invasion of Lebanon*, p. 304-306

¹²⁹ Qasir, p. 150; Kai Bird, *The Good Spy*, p. 287;

¹³⁰ Kai Bird, *The Good Spy*, p. 287

¹³¹ Kai Bird, *The Good Spy*, 295-296; Halloran, Richard. “A MARINE, PISTOL DRAWN, STOPS 3 ISRAELI TANKS.” *The New York Times*. *The New York Times*, February 3, 1983. <https://www.nytimes.com/1983/02/03/world/a-marine-pistol-drawn-stops-3-israeli-tanks.html>.

¹³² “Report of the DoD Commission on Beirut International Airport Terrorist Act, October 23, 1983,” Federation of American Scientists, December 20, 1983 accessed September 1, 2020, <https://fas.org/irp/threat/beirut-1983.pdf#page=48>.

¹³³ “Report of the DoD Commission on Beirut International Airport Terrorist Act, October 23, 1983,” Federation of American Scientists, December 20, 1983, accessed September 1, 2020, <https://fas.org/irp/threat/beirut-1983.pdf#page=48>.

¹³⁴ Taubman, Philip. “U.S. MILITARY TRIES TO CATCH UP IN FIGHTING TERROR.” *The New York Times*. *The New York Times*, December 5, 1984. <https://www.nytimes.com/1984/12/05/world/us-military-tries-to-catch-up-in-fighting-terror.html?pagewanted=all>.

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In the end, DOD only accepted some recommendations on enhancing counterintelligence by an investigative team sent to Beirut in 1983. Infighting between Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger and Secretary of State George Schultz also hindered a concerted American response to Hezbollah. The defense secretary, wary of a repeat of the botched 1979 attempt to rescue American hostages in Iran, objected to using force in Lebanon without clearly defined goals. He therefore rejected retaliation that was not part of a clear and inclusive government policy. Schultz, by contrast, wanted to respond wherever preliminary counterintelligence indicated a threat to U.S. assets existed.¹³⁵

Bad Intelligence: The United States Couldn't Hit Back Effectively

Hezbollah's April 1983 attack on the U.S. embassy in Beirut killed CIA Station Chief Bob Ames, and destroyed the agency's intelligence-gathering capability in Lebanon and much of the Middle East.¹³⁶ Bachir Gemayel's assassination on September 14, 1982, had already left the CIA reeling and scrambling to rebuild its intelligence assets, and now they were completely blind, crippling Washington's ability to prevent or effectively retaliate against future Hezbollah attacks.¹³⁷

A demonstrative case was the intelligence failure leading up to Hezbollah's attack on the Beirut Marine barracks on October 23, 1983. An intelligence build-up between August and October indicated that something would happen, but lacking the assets, the Americans couldn't figure out what. On September 26, 1983, the National Security Agency intercepted electronic messages from Iran's intelligence ministry instructing their ambassador in Damascus to order Hussein al-Musawi—the head of Hezbollah's Islamic Amal faction and Mughniyeh's boss—"to take a spectacular action against the United States Marines." Unfortunately, the message was not discovered until October 25, two days after the barracks bombing.¹³⁸

The U.S. attempted to respond, but—in the words of Secretary of State Schultz—was confused and "paralyzed by self-doubt" in the immediate aftermath of the barracks bombing.¹³⁹ Nevertheless, President Reagan deployed reinforcements to Lebanon and ordered retaliation. On December 4, 1983, U.S. jets bombed Syrian SAMs and Hezbollah positions around Beirut. Despite the damage, two American jets were downed, and an American navigator, Lt. Robert Goodman, was captured by Hezbollah, transferred to Syria, and then released weeks later.¹⁴⁰ The American show of force was overall ineffective, and Hezbollah responded days later with the attacks on U.S. assets in Kuwait. America again responded, on December 14, 1983, with the U.S.S. *New Jersey* shelling Hezbollah positions on the Lebanese coast. The *New Jersey* again targeted Hezbollah's positions on February 8 and 26, 1984, this time in the Bekaa Valley. But that was the end of it. Without accurate intelligence, the military action was of limited effectiveness.¹⁴¹

¹³⁵ "Interviews - Bill Cowan | Target America | FRONTLINE." PBS. Public Broadcasting Service, October 4, 2001. <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/target/interviews/cowan.html>.

¹³⁶ Weiner, *Legacy of Ashes*, p. 453; Masters, Brooke A., and James Naughton. "2 SLAIN HOSTAGES BURIED AS HEROES." The Washington Post. WP Company, December 31, 1991. https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1991/12/31/2-slain-hostages-buried-as-heroes/952b0fb5-900e-48dd-b22e-f48c413e130c/?utm_term=.52d54d831647.

¹³⁷ Weiner, *Legacy of Ashes*, p. 453

¹³⁸ Kai Bird, *The Good Spy*, p. 336-338

¹³⁹ Bird, p. 324

¹⁴⁰ Robert O. Freedman, *The Middle East After the Israeli Invasion of Lebanon*, p. 80

¹⁴¹ Weiner, *Legacy of Ashes*, p. 455

The U.S. was also helpless against Hezbollah's kidnapping campaign, with American intelligence at a loss regarding the hostages' whereabouts or how to rescue them. The CIA, for example, went to great lengths to rescue Buckley, but lacked the necessary intelligence to carry out any of its rescue plans.¹⁴²

In the end, desperation forced the Americans to rely on other sources of dubious reliability. After Ames's death, they turned to the Israelis. The U.S. essentially lacked any independent ability to verify or reject the information received from Israel, and was forced to see Lebanon through its ally's lens, which had its own particular interests in Lebanon that differed markedly from Washington's.¹⁴³ Another source of information was Iranian expatriate and arms dealer Manucher Ghorbanifar. The Israelis may have conveyed information skewed to their perspective in good faith, but Ghorbanifar was a swindler, and led the U.S. into the Iran-Contra scandal to retrieve its hostages from Hezbollah.¹⁴⁴ The arms-for-hostages deal backfired on Washington, turning American hostages in Lebanon into a valuable commodity that could be traded for weapons, funds, or anything else Hezbollah—or its patron Iran—wanted.¹⁴⁵

The lack of credible intelligence also led the U.S. to be used by certain Lebanese actors to settle their own internecine scores, like the Bir al-Abed bombing on March 8, 1985, which killed dozens of Lebanese Shiite civilians.¹⁴⁶ Hezbollah exploited the incident fully. After the bombing, Mughniyeh and other Hezbollah operatives hung a white sheet over the bomb site, proclaiming in black letters, "Made in America." The botched attack continues to factor heavily in Hezbollah's anti-American propaganda.¹⁴⁷

By February 14, 1984, public pressure had forced Reagan to order a withdrawal of U.S. troops from Lebanon.¹⁴⁸ In his wake, he had left hundreds of American casualties and dozens of hostages, a trail of failed military retaliations, and Lebanon's Shiites angrier at the United States than before—precisely Hezbollah's desired outcome. The Party of God, meanwhile, was virtually unscathed. It had studied America's weaknesses, hitting it where it hurt and forcing a U.S. retreat, earning its first victory against the "Greatest Satan."¹⁴⁹ The attacks and failed retaliation had a broader impact on the American psyche, influencing the level of U.S. involvement in Lebanon (and the Middle East more broadly) from then on. For a while, at least, it put an end to Washington's more positive and active policy—part of which was encouraging Arab-Israeli rapprochement, especially after the Egypt-Israel peace accords—and left the

¹⁴² Razoux, p. 278; Weiner, *Legacy of Ashes*, p. 455; "Captive CIA Agent's Death Galvanized Hostage Search." The Washington Post. WP Company, November 25, 1986. https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1986/11/25/captive-cia-agents-death-galvanized-hostage-search/42ae59d0-b3f8-4684-bdb4-d65c55f8210a/?utm_term=.4329f28a066bf; "Agency Watched Helplessly : CIA's 'Private Hostage Crisis' Over Buckley Told." Los Angeles Times. Los Angeles Times, November 25, 1986. <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1986-11-25-mn-13168-story.html>; The Associated Press. "Body Believed to Be C.I.A. Agent And Hostage Is Found in Lebanon." The New York Times. The New York Times. Accessed September 1, 2020. <https://www.nytimes.com/1991/12/27/world/body-believed-to-be-cia-agent-and-hostage-is-found-in-lebanon.html>; Krauss, Clifford. "2 Hostages, Slain in Beirut, Are Buried in U.S." The New York Times. The New York Times, December 31, 1991. <http://www.nytimes.com/1991/12/31/world/2-hostages-slain-in-beirut-are-buried-in-us.html>.

¹⁴³ Kai Bird, p. 322

¹⁴⁴ Weiner, *Legacy of Ashes*, p. 453

¹⁴⁵ Razoux, p. 281; Weiner, *Enemies*, p. 360-362; Ross, p.212; Dana Priest and Nora Boustany, "BUCKLEY'S REMAINS IDENTIFIED," The Washington Post (WP Company, December 28, 1991), https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1991/12/28/buckleys-remains-identified/5b3bf0cc-41c2-4a1c-aa0b-27be8c3795d2/?utm_term=.32aacffbe3e5; Norton, *Hezbollah*, 74.

¹⁴⁶ Bird, p. 325-328; Bob Woodward and Charles R. Babcock, "Anti-Terrorist Plan Rescinded After Unauthorized Bombing," The Washington Post (WP Company, May 12, 1985), https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1985/05/12/anti-terrorist-plan-rescinded-after-unauthorized-bombing/bd2a869b-5b92-4efa-9f3c-740388e0b847/?utm_term=.e3170aa7d79e; Babcock, Charles R., and Bob Woodward. "CIA Denies Part in Bombing." The Washington Post. WP Company, June 23, 1985. https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1985/06/23/cia-denies-part-in-bombing/49955967-2ce9-4b0b-bedc-540ba39f9026/?utm_term=.b96f83a6d06b.

¹⁴⁷ The Good Spy, p. 355; Azani, p. 208, quoting Reuters, March 13, 1988; Qassem, p. 183

¹⁴⁸ Boykin, *Cursed is the Peacemaker*, p. 311; David Daoud, "Hezbollah Since the 1983 Beirut Barracks Bombing: Adapted but Unchanged," *UANI Blog*, November 6, 2017. <https://www.unitedagainstnucleariran.com/blog/hezbollah-since-1983-beirut-barracks-bombings-adapted-but-unrepentant/>;

¹⁴⁹ Lawrence Freedman, *A Choice of Enemies: America Confronts the Middle East*, p. 132-14; Judith Palmer-Harik, *Hezbollah: The Changing Face of Terrorism*, p.36-37; Pierre Razoux, *The Iran-Iraq War*, p. 277

U.S. in a paralyzed, defensive position.¹⁵⁰ The only beneficiaries of this outcome were Iran and Hezbollah.¹⁵¹

The Syrian Spoiler

The U.S. failed to realize early on that Syria was the ultimate power broker in Lebanon during the 1980s. It was only by Damascus' graces that Tehran was able to establish Hezbollah in the country. This would have been particularly helpful when Washington had leverage over the Assad regime, for example, at the outset of the Israeli invasion in June 1982.¹⁵² However, the U.S. withdrawal under fire cost Washington its remaining leverage in Lebanon and the confidence of Lebanese allies. This left Syria unrivaled in its mastery over Lebanon, which, in the long-term, benefited Hezbollah. Ever the realist, President Amine Gemayel immediately accomplished one of Hezbollah's stated goals by abrogating the U.S.-brokered May 17, 1983, peace accord with Israel—immediately upon the Marines' withdrawal. America thus left Lebanon with nothing to show for its efforts or casualties. The U.S.-backed Gemayel then turned to Syria's Hafez al-Assad in April 1984 for talks that, over the succeeding years, would lead to substantial accommodations to the reality that the Assad regime was the dominant power in Lebanon, actively inviting further interference by Damascus and believing Syria alone could hold the country together.¹⁵³ After all, Syria had acquiesced to Hezbollah's operations against the Americans and the Israelis, ultimately forcing both to withdraw from all or most of Lebanon. Assad's army was also battering the remaining PLO forces in Tripoli. Seeing that Syria held the ultimate reins, in part, was why Gemayel was trying to enlist Syria's help in doing what the U.S. proved incapable of: reigning in Hezbollah.¹⁵⁴

Washington also acquiesced to this reality, hoping Damascus would play a constructive role despite all of the disruption it had caused in the past.¹⁵⁵ The Reagan administration thus applauded Syria's reinvasion of Beirut on February 20, 1986, hoping it would rein in Hezbollah.¹⁵⁶ This also placed Syria in a role to effectively blackmail the U.S., something it would repeatedly do in the next decade. As it often did throughout the 1990s, Syria signaled a readiness to cooperate with the U.S. on Lebanon and other regional problems, including Iran's role in the country via Hezbollah.¹⁵⁷ Washington proceeded cautiously, but saw Damascus as central to regional peace and wanted to use Hafez al-Assad's ambivalence towards Iran and his unease over Hezbollah's growing power to pry Syria away from Tehran.¹⁵⁸ But the U.S.-Syrian dialogue did not go as well as expected,¹⁵⁹ and during a September 11, 1987 meeting with a U.S. delegation, Assad disclaimed any responsibility for Iran's actions in Lebanon, saying it was a "sovereign country. My authority does not extend there." However, even after that, Washington continued to look to Syria as the key to solving the Iran and Hezbollah issue in Lebanon.¹⁶⁰ But Syria was willing to give the U.S. what it wanted – including forcibly aiding in dismantling Lebanon's more problematic militias, including Hezbollah – only if its interests in Lebanon prevailed. Syria was using Hezbollah and its extension of Iranian influence in Lebanon as leverage over the U.S.,

¹⁵⁰ Azani, p. 207 "Interviews - Bill Cowan | Target America | FRONTLINE." PBS. Public Broadcasting Service, October 4, 2001. <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/target/interviews/cowan.html>.

¹⁵¹ Azani, p. 208

¹⁵² Elie Salem, *Violence and Diplomacy in Lebanon*, p. 136-137

¹⁵³ Robert O. Freedman, *The Middle East After the Israeli Invasion of Lebanon*, p. 305, 307; Elie A. Salem, *Violence and Diplomacy in Lebanon*, p. 233

¹⁵⁴ Salem, p. 217.

¹⁵⁵ Robert O. Freedman, *The Middle East After the Israeli Invasion of Lebanon*, p. 80-81

¹⁵⁶ Salem, p. 233.

¹⁵⁷ Salem, p. 240-242;

¹⁵⁸ Salem, p. 243

¹⁵⁹ Deeb, Marius. *Syria's Terrorist War on Lebanon and the Peace Process*, p. 140 (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003)

¹⁶⁰ Salem, p. 251-252

which lacked any counter-leverage. This same pattern would repeat itself against Israel in the following decade.

During that time, the U.S. never took advantage of the nature of the Hezbollah-Syrian relationship. When the group emerged, Damascus was ambivalent.¹⁶¹ On the one hand, Hezbollah bridged Syria's relationship with Iran, allowing Damascus to keep pressure on Israel and the United States, and its Lebanese allies—like Amal—in line. On the other hand, Syrian-Iranian relations were still rocky in the 1980s. Though Damascus shared Tehran's interest in thwarting U.S. influence in Lebanon, it was highly suspicious of Iran and its protégé Hezbollah throughout the decade.¹⁶² As the group's strength grew, Hafez al-Assad periodically moved to keep it in check by killing its members and supporting its rival group, Amal.¹⁶³ Assad would have dismantled Hezbollah had its existence become an intolerable thorn in the side of Syrian interests.

2. George H.W. Bush (1989—1993)

When George H.W. Bush took office as U.S. president, Hezbollah was still holding several American hostages and the Lebanese Civil War had yet to end. Much as Washington had tried to disconnect from the country, it still had interests there. However, Washington's missteps during the previous decade squandered any leverage it had in Lebanon to either bring the Party of God to heel, or reassemble the country so Beirut could fulfill the task itself. It therefore begrudgingly turned to Syria to carry out these tasks. However, America's lost influence in Lebanon was more than regained internationally—particularly with the collapse of the Soviet Union, which left the U.S. as the world's sole superpower—and regionally by curbing Saddam Hussein. Moscow's fall from power left Damascus desperate for a new sponsor, but Washington failed to position itself as Syria's new patron the way it had done with Egypt when it made peace with Israel. The U.S. also failed to use the fact that it was benefiting Syria by reining in its Baathist rival in Iraq to extract any concessions on Lebanon.

The New World Order's Road to Beirut Runs through Damascus

The Bush administration's sense of powerlessness in Lebanon, and its concern over the fate of U.S. hostages in that country, led it to seize upon the first opportunity to recreate a central Lebanese government as an interlocutor: the 1989 Taif Agreements. It even begrudgingly accepted Taif's establishment of Syria as Lebanon's new hegemon, in the hopes that Damascus would piece Lebanon back together as a *quid pro quo* for its token participation in the Gulf War against Saddam Hussein.¹⁶⁴

Syria, however, felt no reason to serve U.S. interests. Washington had failed to leverage its advantages over Syria and simply conceded the country to Syrian hegemony via the Taif Agreements, without demanding anything in return other than reassembling the country. Without a tempting enough American carrot or a threatening enough stick, Syria simply set about transforming Lebanon's key institutions to its own liking. This included remolding the Lebanese Armed Forces into an impenetrably pro-Syrian institution and downgrading its mission from national security to a low-intensity internal security role that fit Syria's foreign policy priorities. In contrast to the United States, Hezbollah knew how to adapt to the

¹⁶¹ Hamzeh, p. 102

¹⁶² Norton, *Hezbollah*, 35, 73.

¹⁶³ Norton, 73; Jaber, 32–33

¹⁶⁴ Azani, p. 207-209; Jaber, p. 73; Robert O. Freedman, *The Middle East After the Israeli Invasion of Lebanon*, p.81; Hudson, M.C. "Trying Again: Power-Sharing in Post-Civil War Lebanon." *International Negotiation* 2, no. 1 (1997): 103–22.
<https://doi.org/10.1163/15718069720847889>.

new situation.¹⁶⁵ It couldn't threaten Syria or its hegemony, and instead made itself an indispensable asset to the Assad regime by becoming leverage against Israel to regain the Golan Heights. Thus, Syria allowed the group to retain its arms and forced it to the forefront of taking over the role of Lebanese national security. In the long-term, this robbed the LAF of building up national security credentials or experience—ceding that role to Hezbollah—and by the time Syria finally withdrew from Lebanon, the LAF (and by extension, the U.S.) was at a decided disadvantage vis-à-vis Hezbollah.¹⁶⁶

Madrid's Failed Middle East Peace

In the wake of the Gulf War, the United States used the momentum to convene a regional peace conference between October 30 and November 1, 1991. The conference included two separate tracks aimed at Israeli-Lebanese and Israeli-Syrian peace, and Hezbollah was at the heart of both. Were Washington able to reconcile these decades-long foes—particularly Damascus and Jerusalem—then Hezbollah would have outlived its usefulness.

The Reagan administration did, in fact, pressure the Assad regime to curb Hezbollah during the conference. However, Israel wanted guarantees that this would not be a temporary measure, with Damascus allowing the group to resume its terrorism after the IDF exited south Lebanon or returned the Golan Heights. Conversely, without any concrete reciprocity from Israel in these territories, U.S. pressure tactics seemed to be one-sided in Jerusalem's favor, eroding Washington's leverage.¹⁶⁷

The reality is that the United States failed to understand the Syrian relationship with Hezbollah, and with Lebanon generally. Hafez al-Assad was a shrewd pragmatist, and Damascus' Lebanese alliances were governed by *Realpolitik* and were not eternal. This applied to Hezbollah as much as any other Lebanese faction. Initially allied with Amal, Syria had shifted its alliance to Hezbollah for various reasons, particularly the latter's far greater ability to keep pressure on Israel in south Lebanon.¹⁶⁸ Hezbollah's leadership understood and remained mindful that their relationship with Damascus was one of convenience, despite their rhetoric.

The group was well aware that Damascus was capable of wiping it out – and willing to do so, if necessary – in the late 1980s.¹⁶⁹ Syria even feigned a rapprochement with its arch-rival Saddam Hussein to get Iran to curb Hezbollah and acquiesce to Damascus' dominance over Lebanon. Because of this, Hezbollah rightly saw Syrian peace with Israel and a shift into the Western orbit—much like Egypt's after the 1978 Camp David Accords—as a direct threat.¹⁷⁰ As such, it tried to make itself more useful to accomplishing Syrian aims and objectives than a peace conference. Hezbollah went from being a nuisance to Syria to an asset to leverage against the U.S. and Israel, to regain the Golan Heights.¹⁷¹ Hezbollah also escalated tensions at critical junctures during the talks to ensure their failure, appealing to the Lebanese people and government via propaganda and scare-tactics, because it perceived the very real threat in the talks to its continued existence.¹⁷² In Hezbollah's view, this latest initiative could “cause the downfall of the Islamic nation.”¹⁷³

¹⁶⁵ Salloukh, p. 160-161; Hala Jaber, *Hezbollah: Born With a Vengeance*, p. 32

¹⁶⁶ Bassil Salloukh, , *Politics of Sectarianism in Postwar Lebanon*, p. 126

¹⁶⁷ Azani, p. 209

¹⁶⁸ Norton, *Hezbollah*, 23.

¹⁶⁹ Hala Jaber, p. 35

¹⁷⁰ Norton, *Hezbollah*, p. 35

¹⁷¹ Jaber, p. 73; Ahmad Nizar Hamzeh, *In the Path of Hizbullah*, p.26

¹⁷² Azani, p. 211-

¹⁷³ Azani, p. 211

Meanwhile, U.S. President George H.W. Bush and U.S. Secretary of State James Baker and were not sympathetic enough to Israel's genuine concerns that south Lebanon and the Golan Heights once again becoming staging points for attacks on the Galilee. The Israelis also saw that the Americans were all too eager to acquiesce to Syrian demands, and unwilling to leverage their advantage over Damascus. Washington was thus unable to reassure the Israelis enough to convince them to grant Syria what it wanted, which would have obviated the need for Hezbollah.

3. Bill Clinton (1993—2001)

President Bill Clinton took office during the idyll of the 1990s, with the United States the world's sole superpower. Amidst the euphoria of U.S.-brokered Israeli-Arab peace talks bearing fruit, Washington paid little attention to Hezbollah's terrorism. By the group's design, this was seen almost exclusively as a problem tied to Israel's occupation of south Lebanon, with few implications for American national security.¹⁷⁴

America did nonetheless take limited action against Hezbollah during these years. The State Department first listed the group as a Foreign Terrorist Organization in 1997, and its annual assessments indicated that Hezbollah continued to monitor U.S. assets in Lebanon.¹⁷⁵ Treasury also began sanctioning the group and its leadership during this decade. However, U.S. action was piecemeal, not comprehensive. Washington also failed to remedy its ignorance of Lebanon, which had caused its repeated failures in the country during the 1980s. As a result, the U.S. made political missteps during two Israeli military campaigns against Hezbollah, which weakened Washington's bargaining power in Lebanon and simultaneously served to further legitimize the group. The Clinton administration also treated Hafez al-Assad, Syria's president, as an honest interlocutor, even as Assad set about strengthening Hezbollah's position in Lebanon to use as leverage against both the United States and Israel. And as Bill Clinton was religiously focused on solving the problem of terrorism by achieving Arab-Israeli peace, Hezbollah was building alliances with al-Qaeda and other terror groups and attempting to undercut Washington and its interests. Hezbollah also exploited the myopia of this foreign policy approach to ensure its survival and prevent the U.S. from accomplishing the peace treaties that could have spelled the group's demise.¹⁷⁶

Failing Israel and Lebanon

Twice during this decade, the Clinton administration failed to balance its commitments to both Israel and Lebanon. In 1993 and again in 1996, Israel launched two massive operations against Hezbollah, which also intentionally wrought havoc on the country's civilians and infrastructure as a means to pressure Beirut to rein in the group. During the first of these operations, dubbed "Accountability," the U.S. persuaded Lebanon not to complain to the United Nations Security Council, instead allowing Secretary of State Warren Christopher to negotiate a ceasefire. The outcome, however, was an agreement that was tantamount to further American acknowledgment of Syria's dominance over Lebanon, and further empowered that role. Syria was essentially able to exploit the tensions to set ceasefire conditions that would continue serving its interests.¹⁷⁷

¹⁷⁴ Benjamin, Simon. *Age of Sacred Terror*, p. 220

¹⁷⁵ "Foreign Terrorist Organizations." U.S. Department of State. U.S. Department of State. Accessed September 1, 2020. https://1997-2001.state.gov/global/terrorism/terrorist_orgs_list.html; "Designation of Foreign Terrorist Organizations." Federal Register, October 8, 1997. <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/FR-1997-10-08/pdf/97-27030.pdf>.

¹⁷⁶ "Clinton: Mideast Peace Can Undercut Global Terror Threat." Haaretz, Haaretz.com, January 11, 2018. <https://www.haaretz.com/1.5121759>.

¹⁷⁷ Palmer-Harik, *Hezbollah*, p. 115-116

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In April 1996, the U.S. backed Israeli Prime Minister Shimon Peres's "Operation Grapes of Wrath." U.S. efforts in March to restrain Hezbollah and encourage Israeli restraint failed. In fact, officials within the Clinton administration claim Washington gave Israel the green light to launch the operation, on the condition that the Israelis were on their own if something went wrong. And it did. On April 18, 1996, Israel shelled a UN compound in the south Lebanon village of Qana, killing 106 Lebanese civilians. The gruesome aftermath of the Israeli strike was forever seared into the Lebanese psyche as evidence of the Jewish state's inherent criminality. Until Qana, the Clinton administration had little to say about Israel's conduct of the operation, instead defending Jerusalem's right to self-defense and blaming Hezbollah. But, when Qana happened, it retroactively negatively colored American support for Grapes of Wrath, and set back the standing of both Israel and the U.S. in the region.¹⁷⁸

Washington was once again forced to turn to Damascus for help, further solidifying its role as Lebanon's powerbroker. Incidentally, even Tehran acknowledged Syria's role, but the U.S. never took advantage of that fact to apply the right kind of pressure on Damascus to rein in or dismantle Hezbollah in Lebanon. Washington was still acting like Syria had the upper hand, despite the fact that Damascus had been trying to get closer to the U.S. since the downfall of the Soviet Union.

The United States continued talks with Syria, Lebanon, Israel, and—indirectly—Iran to find an acceptable solution. The outcome was a summit in Damascus, hosting representatives from the U.S., Russia, Iran, France, Hezbollah, and Lebanon, making it difficult for the U.S. to set conditions.¹⁷⁹ Warren Christopher and Dennis Ross were sent to the region, securing a ceasefire and the so-called April Understandings of 1996. Essentially, the April Understandings repeated and reaffirmed the 1993 agreement, including its mistakes. It even went one step further by placing Hezbollah and Israel on equal moral footing, and served to protect Hezbollah's position more than Israel's. Further, no side—including the Israelis themselves—challenged Hezbollah's "right" to attack Israeli soldiers in south Lebanon. The Understandings gave tacit international imprimatur to the notion that Hezbollah was a "Lebanese national resistance movement," fighting against the occupying IDF—strengthening Hezbollah's position in Lebanon.¹⁸⁰

Another outcome was the creation of a supervisory committee that enabled Damascus to withstand future U.S. pressure to disarm Hezbollah, making it more difficult for President Clinton to pressure Syria into restraining the group. This new reality—which remained in place until Israel's withdrawal from south Lebanon in May of 2000—came back to haunt Clinton during later Syrian-Israeli peace talks, and the newfound reality provided Hezbollah with cover to continue its existence and growth even after the IDF's withdrawal.

Trusting Assad

As part of his regional peace-making efforts, Clinton pressed Assad to commit to making peace with Israel and normalizing relations. He also tried to press Damascus to withdraw all of its forces from Lebanon and respect the latter's independence, but as part of a comprehensive Middle East peace. Assad seemed receptive, which Clinton credits to a newfound need for Western support after the collapse of his Soviet patron.¹⁸¹ Syria tried to get closer to the U.S. after the downfall of the USSR, and this weighed

¹⁷⁸ Jaber, p. 193-195

¹⁷⁹ Azani, p. 220

¹⁸⁰ Norton, *Hezbollah*, p.85; Ross, p. 263; Harik, p.122-123; Azani, p. 221

¹⁸¹ Bill Clinton, *My Life*, p. 575

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heavily on the Syrian-Iranian alliance, which reached a low-point in 1995 during the progress of Syrian-Israeli peace talks.

But Clinton's failure in securing the peace that could have taken Syria out of the pro-Iran orbit and to Damascus forcibly disarming Hezbollah resulted from both misreading Assad and not pressing the full effect of America's advantage. In fact, Clinton's memoirs show an almost fawning respect for Assad.¹⁸² The president seemingly failed to grasp that the Syrian president was a brutal, cunning, and shrewd dictator concerned primarily with self-preservation. Assad wanted continued Alawite rule in Syria, and everything else—including his Baathist ideology, lip-service to resistance, alliance with Hezbollah and Iran, and the Golan Heights—were simply means to that end.

Towards the end of his term in late 1999, Clinton tried to revive Israeli-Syrian peace negotiations, and initiated talks between Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak and Syrian Foreign Minister Farouk al-Sharaa. During his electoral campaign, Barak had promised to end Israel's occupation of south Lebanon, either unilaterally or through a peace deal with Syria. But while Barak signaled a willingness to be very flexible on Syrian needs, Assad had other concerns.¹⁸³ Advanced in age and realizing the end of his rule was nigh, he was grooming his inexperienced son Bashar to succeed him, and realized that a peace deal with Israel might jeopardize the family's legitimacy and the prospects of a peaceful transition of power from father to son. He was therefore unwilling to seem weak in negotiations with Israel, and when Barak pressed for some gesture to sell to a skeptical Israeli public, Assad balked and abandoned the talks altogether.¹⁸⁴

The next (and last) time Clinton met Assad was in March of 2000 in Geneva, gifting him a tie and a generous Israeli compromise.¹⁸⁵ But Assad cut off the lame duck mid-presentation, taking a hardline stance that contradicted his earlier positions. Barak's new offer, said Clinton, was respectable, but perhaps too late.¹⁸⁶ In May, Barak, realizing there was no hope for peace with Syria, delivered on his campaign promise and abruptly ordered the IDF to withdraw from Lebanon. Hezbollah claimed victory for itself and resistance over diplomacy in "liberating Lebanese territory"—and by proxy, over the United States.¹⁸⁷

The unilateral Israeli withdrawal also increased Syria's stakes in retaining Hezbollah as an asset in Lebanon. It now lacked any leverage over Israel to pressure it to return the Golan Heights, and thus prodded the puppet government of Selim al-Hoss in Beirut to proclaim that the Shebaa Farms are Lebanese and that the Israeli occupation had therefore not ended.¹⁸⁸ Damascus thus gave Hezbollah's "resistance" a new contrived lease on life, and an excuse not to disarm, in order to keep a form of pressure on Israel to be able to regain the Golan.¹⁸⁹ Assad was soon replaced by his inexperienced son, Bashar, who treated Hezbollah and Iran as equals.

Hafez al-Assad, the "Lion of Damascus," had been a thorn in Washington's side for decades, but that was motivated by his self-interest, rather than ideological commitment. Syria had yet to cede its sovereignty to Iran or Hezbollah in the 1990s, as it would effectively do after the onset of the Syrian Civil War in 2011.

¹⁸² Bill Clinton, *My Life*, p. 576

¹⁸³ Bill Clinton, *My Life*, p. 884-887

¹⁸⁴ Bill Clinton, *My Life*, p. 884-887

¹⁸⁵ Blanford, *Killing Mr. Lebanon*, p. 71-72

¹⁸⁶ Bill Clinton, *My Life*, p. 903-904; Blanford, p. 71-72

¹⁸⁷ Bill Clinton, *My Life*, 884-885

¹⁸⁸ Blanford, *Killing*, p. 74, 78

¹⁸⁹ Blanford, *Killing*, p. 74, 78

In fact, Damascus held the upper hand in the relationship at the time, and Assad refused to even treat Tehran or its Lebanon-based proxy as equal partners.¹⁹⁰ They were subordinate tactical allies, and failing to pressure Syria back then to disarm Hezbollah cost the United States a historical opportunity that was perhaps permanently lost after 2011.¹⁹¹

In the midst of ongoing regional peace talks during the mid-1990s, Clinton attempted to use the Lebanese-American mutual committee to pressure Beirut to disarm Hezbollah. Syria and Hezbollah counter-pressured. Clinton also began freezing Hezbollah accounts in the United States, to limit its movements and shut down its funding, and NATO accepted a decision to prepare for action against the threat of the Islamic terrorist movement. Hezbollah considered this a “world war against Islam,” and called for an “economic war against all American products.” Rumors circulated in Lebanon that American pressure led to Hezbollah’s exclusion from the Cabinet, but the group denied this. Lebanon acceded to some American demands, but not disarming or reining in Hezbollah.¹⁹²

Breathing Room

Though at the time Hezbollah did not rank high on the list of perceived threats to the U.S., the Clinton administration was the first to begin sanctioning the group. The first measure came on January 25, 1995. The Treasury Department’s Office of Foreign Assets Control sanctioned Hezbollah pursuant to Executive Order 12947 in response to the group “threatening to disrupt the [Middle East] peace process.”¹⁹³ The State Department then designated Hezbollah as a Foreign Terrorist Organization on October 8, 1997.¹⁹⁴

These were positive moves, indicating an increasing awareness of the threat posed by Hezbollah. However, they were not part of a comprehensive American strategy to combat the group, and therefore were insufficient and mostly symbolic, having little overall effect on the group or its ability to undercut U.S. regional policies. Coupled with American diplomatic failures that strengthened Hezbollah’s hand—like the April Understandings of 1996—the group emerged from the decade stronger than before, with its ability to threaten the U.S., its allies, and interests undiminished.

Section B. Post-9/11

1. George W. Bush (2001–2009)

The 9/11 attacks defined George W. Bush’s presidency more than any other event. Having taken office on a platform of disengagement from the Middle East, terrorism—particularly Hezbollah’s, which was not directly targeting the U.S.—was a low priority for the new administration. However, 9/11 brought an about-face, not only in the new administration’s attitude, but also internationally. It renewed interest in

¹⁹⁰ Elie A. Salem, *Violence and Diplomacy in Lebanon*, p. 243.

¹⁹¹ “Patterns of Global Terrorism 2001.” U.S. Department of State. U.S. Department of State, May 2002. <https://2009-2017.state.gov/j/ct/rls/crt/2001/pdf/index.htm>; Badran, Tony. “The Devil You Don’t Know.” Now. Media, June 20, 2014. <https://now.mmedia.me/lb/en/commentaryanalysis/552197-the-devil-you-dont-know>.

¹⁹² Azani, p. 216-218

¹⁹³ “Terrorist Assets Report: Calendar Year 2002 Annual Report to the Congress on Assets in the United States of Terrorist Countries and International Terrorism Program Designees.” Homeland Security Digital Library, 2002. <https://www.hsdl.org/?abstract>.
; “Prohibiting Transactions With Terrorists Who Threaten To Disrupt the Middle East Peace Process.” Federal Register, January 25, 1995. <https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/1995/01/25/X95-110125/prohibiting-transactions-with-terrorists-who-threaten-to-disrupt-the-middle-east-peace-process>.

“Foreign Terrorist Organizations.” U.S. Department of State. U.S. Department of State. Accessed September 1, 2020. https://1997-2001.state.gov/global/terrorism/terrorist_orgs_list.html; “Designation of Foreign Terrorist Organizations.” Federal Register, October 8, 1997. <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/FR-1997-10-08/pdf/97-27030.pdf>.

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Hezbollah again, and created an environment where the United States could begin to work in concert with other nations against Hezbollah, in contrast to the previous decade. Defining the group as a terror organization was once again up for discussion in the international arena.

However, U.S. and Israeli diplomatic efforts to achieve this met with little success, with only two more countries defining the group in whole as a terrorist group, and Australia only listing its “terrorist wing.”¹⁹⁵ The lack of concerted international pressure was one factor that allowed Hezbollah to withstand both UN Security Council Resolutions 1559 and 1701 and avoid being disarmed.¹⁹⁶

Internationalizing the fight against Hezbollah was just one of many lost opportunities during this decade to curtail the group. The U.S. also squandered opportunities created by the invasion of Iraq, the Cedar Revolution, and Israel’s Second Lebanon War. By the end of the Bush administration, Hezbollah was no weaker in Lebanon or regionally than it had been before the “War on Terror,” and arguably its regional footprint had expanded considerably.

The War on Terrorism and Hezbollah

Hezbollah wasn’t directly linked to the 9/11 attacks, despite its prior relations with Al-Qaeda.¹⁹⁷ Nonetheless, 9/11 renewed American focus on the group, and the Bush administration opted for confrontation with Hezbollah, unlike its predecessors.¹⁹⁸ In fact, it seems that only after the War on Terror did the U.S. begin to grasp the magnitude of the threat from Hezbollah and its global terrorist reach, as indicated by a 2002 State Department report. Though the United States went to war with AQ, it considered Hezbollah the “A-Team” of terrorists.¹⁹⁹ Undersecretary of Defense Douglas Feith, on October 08, 2002, said Hezbollah is “one of the most highly developed and dangerous networks,” and is “functioning in many continents,” remarking on its support by Iran and Syria, and operations and cells in Africa, South America, and Asia. He added, “[w]e are certainly watching it, conscious of it, and it is one of the key international terrorist networks; there’s no question about that.”²⁰⁰

September 11 also renewed U.S. attention on Hezbollah’s activities in the Tri-Border Area of Argentina, Brazil, and Paraguay, where the group raises “millions of dollars annually via criminal enterprises.” This area has long been considered a hub for arms and drug trafficking, contraband and smuggling, document and currency fraud, money laundering, and pirated goods – all enterprises with which Hezbollah has become deeply involved to finance its global activities.²⁰¹ Evidence also shows the presence of Hezbollah “members or sympathizers” in other Latin American countries, including northern Chile, in Colombia near the Venezuela border, in Venezuela, and in Panama.²⁰² Lebanese businessmen in the area transfer

¹⁹⁵ Azani, p. 237

¹⁹⁶ Azani, p. 238

¹⁹⁷ Age of Sacred Terror, p. 127; Eben Kaplan, “The Al-Qaeda-Hezbollah Relationship,” Council on Foreign Relations (Council on Foreign Relations, August 10, 2006), <https://www.cfr.org/background/al-qaeda-hezbollah-relationship>; Eli Karmon, “‘Fight on All Fronts,’ Hizballah, The War on Terror, and the War in Iraq,” p. 11, 14, *Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, January 12, 2003

(<https://www.ict.org.il/Article.aspx?ID=1137#gsc.tab=0>); James Worrall, Simon Mabon, and Gordon Clubb, *Hezbollah: From Islamic Resistance to Government*, p. 17

¹⁹⁸ George W. Bush, *Decision Points*, 190.

¹⁹⁹ Leung, Rebecca. “Hezbollah: ‘A-Team Of Terrorists.’” CBS News. CBS Interactive, April 18, 2003.

<https://www.cbsnews.com/news/hezbollah-a-team-of-terrorists/>.

²⁰⁰ “Operation Enduring Freedom Update.” Douglas J. Feith. Department of Defense: Office of the Undersecretary of Defense for Policy, October 8, 2002. http://www.dougfeith.com/docs/2002_10_08_OEF_Update.pdf.

²⁰¹ “Patterns of Global Terrorism 2001.” U.S. Department of State. U.S. Department of State, May 2002. <https://2009-2017.state.gov/j/ct/rls/crt/2001/pdf/index.htm>.

²⁰² “Patterns of Global Terrorism 2001.” U.S. Department of State. U.S. Department of State, May 2002. <https://2009-2017.state.gov/j/ct/rls/crt/2001/pdf/index.htm>.

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millions of dollars to Hezbollah—its operatives, “charities,” and other entities worldwide—via local cover businesses.²⁰³

But targeting Hezbollah as part of the War on Terror wasn’t a foregone conclusion. The group was initially excluded from Bush’s Executive Order 13224, signed on September 23, 2001, which blocked the assets of terror-linked organizations, due to an erroneous belief that Hezbollah lacked a “global reach.” Most troublingly, this view indicated an intelligence gap related to Hezbollah’s capabilities. Eventually, after much debate within the administration, Hezbollah was added to the list on November 2, 2001, over the objection of leading officials, including Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld.²⁰⁴

From there, the perception of Hezbollah’s threat to the United States only grew. In February 2002, the FBI—which had been tracking Hezbollah’s domestic networks since the early 1990s—testified that its investigations indicated “many Hezbollah subjects based in the United States have the capability to attempt terrorist attacks here should this be a desired objective of the group.”²⁰⁵ A year later, CIA Director George Tenet testified to Hezbollah’s superiority over AQ, and its global reach. In 2006, Director of National Intelligence John Negroponte testified before the Senate Intelligence Committee that Hezbollah was capable of attacking U.S. interests to protect Iran.²⁰⁶

America’s South Lebanon

The South Lebanon conflict is often called “Israel’s Vietnam,” the most dangerous consequence of which – according to the late Yitzhak Rabin – was letting “the Shiite genie out of the bottle.”²⁰⁷ If so, then Iraq was the United States’ South Lebanon and, like the Israeli misadventure in south Lebanon, provided the opportunity for Hezbollah and Iran to rouse Iraqi Shiites against Washington.²⁰⁸ With 15 years of hindsight, the Iraq War can be described as a mixed bag at best. However, the United States possessed a perhaps unintended advantage at the outset of the invasion. On the offensive, Washington’s armies were now deployed on two of Iran’s borders—Iraq to the west, and Afghanistan to the east—and on Syria’s eastern frontier. Both Hezbollah and these two sponsors had good reason for concern, since the Bush administration had earmarked them as state sponsors of terrorism. Some U.S. officials had even described Damascus, the Iranian government, and Hezbollah as “low-hanging fruit” in the War on Terror.²⁰⁹

Hezbollah’s fear of an American presence in Iraq was evident long before the invasion. Nasrallah had repeatedly voiced his opposition to toppling Saddam Hussein’s regime, despite his group’s historical enmity with Baathist Baghdad. He encouraged the Iraqi opposition—namely, Shiites—to convene a national reconciliation conference, which did not endear him to his Iraqi Shiite co-religionists, who had suffered the brunt of Hussein’s brutality for decades.²¹⁰ Hezbollah understandably felt threatened in those early days, and wanted to step out of U.S. crosshairs. Hezbollah may have raised its rhetoric, but

²⁰³ “Patterns of Global Terrorism 2001.” U.S. Department of State. U.S. Department of State, May 2002. <https://2009-2017.state.gov/j/ct/rls/crt/2001/pdf/index.htm>.

²⁰⁴ Norton, Hezbollah, p. 76

²⁰⁵ Levitt, Matthew A. “Iranian State Sponsorship of Terror.” Iran Watch, February 6, 2005. <https://www.iranwatch.org/sites/default/files/us-hirc-middleeastsub-levitt-prepared-021605.pdf#page=2>.

²⁰⁶ “CURRENT AND PROJECTED NATIONAL SECURITY THREATS TO THE UNITED STATES.” Hearings | Senate Intelligence Committee, February 2, 2006. <https://www.intelligence.senate.gov/hearings/current-and-projected-national-security-threats-united-states>.

²⁰⁷ Wright, Robin. “Another Siege: Israel’s War on the P.L.O.” The New Yorker, August 2, 2014. <https://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/another-summer-another-siege-israels-war-p-l-o>.

²⁰⁸ Condoleezza Rice, *No Higher Honor*, p. 164; Judith Palmer Harik, *Hezbollah: The Changing Face of Terrorism*, p.33

²⁰⁹ Blanchard, p. 86; Norton, 119-120.

²¹⁰ Hamzeh, p. 138

meanwhile its behavior became more circumspect, and it restrained even its provocations against Israel in the south.

The U.S. needn't have invaded Syria or Iran, but their apprehension gave Washington an advantage that it failed to exploit. This allowed Hezbollah time to regroup and implement its plan to sink America into the Iraqi quagmire. Though Washington pressured Syria to lower the profile of Palestinian terror groups headquartered in Damascus, it failed to do the same with Hezbollah in Lebanon.²¹¹ Hezbollah and Iran had also angered Iraq's Shiites by opposing toppling their oppressor, but the U.S. failed to capitalize on that anger to bring the Shiites into its orbit, while still balancing Sunni rights in the country. The Bush administration also ignored Hezbollah's repeated veiled threats to turn Iraq into a quagmire for the U.S., allowing it to lay the groundwork for raising and training the Shiite militias that would bedevil American forces until their withdrawal.

Shiites are Iraq's largest demographic, and Shiite militias are growing in size and influence in the country. Their increased popularity will pose a serious obstacle to U.S.-Iraqi relations moving forward, particularly as these groups begin to emulate Hezbollah's model of political participation and providing social services and security to Shiites.

On the eve of the invasion, Nasrallah predicted that Iraqis would not welcome U.S. troops with "roses and jasmine" as liberators, but with "rifles, blood, and martyrdom operations. We are not afraid of the American invaders, and we will keep saying, 'death to America.'" He also promised that the United States' entry into Iraq foreshadowed the downfall of American sole-superpower status and the return to a multi-polar world order.²¹² Nasrallah's prediction did not initially pan out, but came true for two reasons: his own group's activities in Iraq, and American miscalculations.²¹³

Blinded by Freedom's Light

The Bush administration acted to end Syria's military occupation of Lebanon. On December 12, 2003, it signed the Syrian Accountability and Lebanese Sovereignty Restoration Act (SALSRA), which, among other things, called on Damascus to end its support for terrorism and withdraw its troops from Lebanon.²¹⁴ Washington soon followed up with UN Security Council Resolution 1559, a joint effort co-sponsored with France that also called for Syrian military withdrawal and for Hezbollah to disarm.

These international instruments, coupled with American military presence on Syria's border and the threat of toppling the Assad regime, put teeth in the eruption of Lebanese anger at Syria after the assassination of Rafic Hariri. The problem was a lack of American follow-through, and ignoring the other source of Lebanon's problems: Iran. The Bush administration also underestimated Hezbollah's ability to rebound from the loss of the protection of Syrian dominance which had allowed it to flourish in Lebanon for almost two decades.²¹⁵

²¹¹ Simon, Benjamin. *Age of Sacred Terror*, p. 458-459.

²¹² "كلمة الأمين العام في اليوم العاشر من المحرم"

(The Secretary General's Speech on the 10th of Muharram)," *The Islamic Resistance in Lebanon's Audio Library* (Archived), March 13, 2003. (<https://web.archive.org/web/20160730021526/http://audio.moqawama.org/details.php?cid=1&linkid=22>), Direct Audio File (http://www.mediaspecial.org/sound/mediasave.php?filename=/hassan/real/2003/moharam13032003_day10.rm) at 36:10-36:26.

²¹³ Norton, p. 119

²¹⁴ "Syria Accountability and Lebanese Sovereignty Restoration Act of 2003." U.S. Congress, December 12, 2003.

<https://www.congress.gov/108/plaws/publ175/PLAW-108publ175.pdf>.

²¹⁵ Blanford, Killing, p. 148

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Washington was also too optimistic about the nascent March 14 movement's ability to assert itself on its own. President Bush credited the success of the Cedar Revolution to international diplomatic pressure and the Lebanese desire "to be free," alone.²¹⁶ Yet, as the Syrian Civil War has proven, this was not the case. The deciding factor was the perception that American teeth backed the Cedar Revolution, in the form of an American military presence next door to Syria.²¹⁷ After succeeding in pushing Syria out and a parliamentary electoral victory in Lebanon's first free elections since the onset of the Civil War, the U.S. thought Lebanon's nationalist forces could stand up on their own. However, 35 years of Syrian dominance had prevented the rise of any credible civil society, robust counter political movements, or a strong Lebanese army.²¹⁸

This belief held firm despite the fact that newly elected March 14 Lebanese Prime Minister Fouad Siniora warned U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice of his limited ability to counter Syria and Hezbollah's influence.²¹⁹ To a certain extent, the Americans realized that their Lebanese counterparts needed their help, but they never followed through in the necessary ways.^{220 221} Washington had too much faith in Siniora, considering him tough and competent, and even "long[ing] for similar leadership in Afghanistan and Iraq."²²² Whether this confidence was personally deserved or not, he simply did not have the capability to turn the tide against Hezbollah alone, or merely with encouraging U.S. rhetoric.²²³ By contrast, Hezbollah had almost two decades to grow, become better organized, funded and armed, and able to sustain the long-term mobilization of its supporters.

One weakness Hezbollah exploited that the U.S. never remedied were the already-emerging fractures within March 14. This allowed the Shiite group to peel away the popular Michel Aoun and his Free Patriotic Movement (FPM), with their 21 parliamentary seats, from the pro-Western coalition. Aoun's Christian rivals, realizing they would be overshadowed by his popularity, did not invite him to join a government or agree to back his presidential ambitions.²²⁴ Aoun was an opportunist who had set his sights on the presidential palace decades earlier, and the Hezbollah-led March 8 took advantage of this to bring him and his massive Christian following into their orbit, nearly giving them parity with March 14's numbers and, with time, allowing them to create further fissures within the pro-Western alliance.²²⁵

The opportunistic Aoun, having learned from his past mistakes of failing to reach out to Shiites and placate the Syrians in the late 1980s, readily obliged and entered into an alliance with Hezbollah in 2006.²²⁶ Twelve years on, this has become one of the longest-lasting and most durable political alliances in Lebanese history. It has allowed Hezbollah to set the tone of Lebanese politics ever since and—particularly after the onset of the Syrian Civil War—to gradually replace Syria with Iran as Lebanon's new hegemon.

The United States also failed to strengthen Lebanon's state institutions as credible alternatives to Hezbollah. This was particularly true with the Lebanese army, which, according to a 2005 U.S.

²¹⁶ Bush, *Decision Points*, 410-412; Azani, p. 218; Bush, George W. "Transcript: Bush's Remarks on Conflicts in the Middle East." The Washington Post. WP Company, March 8, 2005. https://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A16780-2005Mar8_3.html.

²¹⁷ Bush, *Decision Points*, 410-412; Azani, p. 218

²¹⁸ Rice, *No Higher Honor*, p. 337-340, 432; George W. Bush, *Decision Points*, 410-412

²¹⁹ Rice, *No Higher Honor*, p. 432

²²⁰ Rice, *No Higher Honor*, p. 374

²²¹ Bassil Salloukh, *Politics of Sectarianism in Postwar Lebanon*, p. 113

²²² Rice, p. 432

²²³ Rice, p. 485

²²⁴ Norton, p. 129.

²²⁵ Norton, p. 129-130

²²⁶ Norton, p. 129

assessment, was not equipped or trained to “succeed in anything but the most basic tactical missions against minimal and irresolute opposition, and is still fragile due to a cultural loyalty along confessional lines.” LAF required a multi-year “sustained period of intense,” training to be able to fulfill its responsibility of asserting the Lebanese government’s control within its own borders. These deficiencies were on particular display as challenges began to emerge which LAF was unqualified to confront, having been sapped of its strength by decades of Syrian dominance. This included the need to need to deploy to the South for the first time since 1968 after the Second Lebanon War, the rise of Sunni militant groups in 2007, and Hezbollah’s May 2008 “putsch” in Beirut.²²⁷ Though the United States provided LAF with aid, it was not enough to meet those challenges at the time, and Hezbollah remained the only credible military force in the country.²²⁸

Washington also looked to Syria as the sole source of Lebanon’s woes. It failed to account for the fact that the vacuum created by Syrian withdrawal would be replaced by the only country in the region with a Lebanon-based proxy: Iran. The immediate aftermath of Syria’s withdrawal left Hezbollah as the most powerful actor in Lebanon, and the group readily replaced mercurial support with that of its patron. The U.S. missed an opportunity to simultaneously squeeze Iran, along with Syria, in the wake of the Cedar Revolution, to cut off Hezbollah’s continued sources of support.

The United States also failed to back credible Shiite alternatives to Hezbollah which could siphon support away from the group and in favor of March 14. After all, though Shiites were the pro-Syrian March 8 Alliance’s backbone, they were not particularly fond of Syria’s occupation of Lebanon, because it facilitated the entry of Syrian workers and their economic competition with the traditionally poor community.²²⁹ However, Amal and Hezbollah supporters—together, comprising the vast majority of Shiites—feared the implications for their community of replacing Syrian influence with America’s.²³⁰ But dissenting—and influential—voices existed.²³¹ Anti-Hezbollah Shiite dissent arose in the wake of both the Cedar Revolution and the group’s entry into the Syrian Civil War. Both times, the party moved to effectively quash this internal threat. And the U.S. did little to bolster this independent Shiite voice.²³²

Finally, Washington failed to demonstrate its credibility as an ally of March 14 against Hezbollah at crucial junctures. This was perhaps most starkly demonstrated when Hezbollah invaded and occupied Beirut, in response to the Siniora government’s decision to shut down its telecommunications network and remove Rafic Hariri Airport’s security chief, who was tied to the group. As Hezbollah responded with force, the LAF stood by fearing its involvement would spark a civil war, but so did the U.S. To end the crisis, Lebanon’s pro-Western forces were finally forced to meet for a summit with their political foes in Doha. There, they capitulated to Hezbollah’s demands for veto power over the government’s decisions. They had little option when the extent of the support that Washington was willing to offer was dispatching Secretary Rice to Qatar to “to show support for the March 14 politicians.” Rice concedes that the United States hadn’t done enough for its Lebanese allies, but seems to justify this by being resigned to chaos being Lebanon’s fate. “But that was Lebanon: a country in a perpetual state of instability and deadlock.”²³³ Instead of any concrete measures of support to demonstrate to March 14 that they would not

²²⁷ Bassil Salloukh, *Politics of Sectarianism in Postwar Lebanon*, p. 113

²²⁸ Abdel-Kader, Nizar. “US Military Assistance to Lebanon: Equipping LAF Not Transforming It.” Official Website of the Lebanese Army, October 2012. <https://www.lebarmy.gov.lb/en/content/us-military-assistance-lebanon-equipping-laf-not-transforming-it>; Nerguizian, Aram. “The Lebanese Armed Forces, Hezbollah, and Military Legitimacy.” Center for Strategic and International Studies, July 8, 2020.

<https://www.csis.org/analysis/lebanese-armed-forces-hezbollah-and-military-legitimacy>

²²⁹ Blanford, Killing, p.119

²³⁰ Blanford, Killing p. 158

²³¹ Blanford, Killing, p. 160

²³² Salloukh, 169-170; Alagha, Identity Construction, 151-152;

²³³ Rice, p. 665

be going it alone against Hezbollah and its Iranian patron, she settled for symbolic moves like landing her plane at Beirut International Airport in a show of defiance against Hezbollah's "ownership" of it.²³⁴ Somehow, she was still convinced that Washington's Lebanon policy succeeded on balance, only because the March 14 alliance still managed to win the 2009 parliamentary elections.²³⁵

Lebanon: Mission Not Accomplished

Washington also placed undue trust in Israel's war strategy and goals in the 2006 war with Hezbollah. It viewed the IDF's military response as positive, believing it could uproot the terrorist organization and solve the problem bedeviling both Lebanon and the Jewish state. It therefore kept delaying a ceasefire to give the IDF time to finish the job. Yet, despite initial successes against Hezbollah, Israel's war effort began to flounder quickly and two days into the war the Israelis themselves were doubting their ability to accomplish their goals.²³⁶

However, despite some misgivings about Israel's conduct of the war, President Bush and Secretary Rice saw the war as an opportunity to bolster the Siniora government's authority.²³⁷ But this depended on a swift Israeli campaign that did minimal harm to Lebanon and its civilians while seriously damaging Hezbollah.²³⁸ To that end, the U.S. counseled Israeli restraint. But Jerusalem, largely for reasons of domestic politics, struck Lebanon hard but failed to even dent Hezbollah.²³⁹ Nonetheless, the U.S. still acted to delay a ceasefire, hoping—in retrospect, unrealistically—that the IDF would succeed in disarming Hezbollah. There was immense overconfidence in Israel's ability to accomplish in a matter of days what it had failed to do in the course of an 18-year occupation of south Lebanon.²⁴⁰

Then Israel made a critical mistake. On July 29, in the midst of full-throated U.S. support for the Israeli military campaign, the IDF carried out an erroneous strike in Qana that was reminiscent of the 1996 bombardment of the UN compound. A tug-of-war ensued in the U.S. administration on whether to continue supporting the war, with President Bush finally siding with Secretary Rice that to do so would mean that "America will be dead in the Middle East," and Siniora—caught between Hezbollah and the IDF—might be toppled.²⁴¹ As the IDF's campaign floundered, Bush sided with Rice, realizing that continuing to support the Israeli war effort would mean U.S. support for one Security Council veto after the next, ending with American—and not Iranian or Syrian—isolation. He then began pushing the Israelis to wrap up their campaign prematurely.²⁴² The outcome was UN Security Council Resolution 1701, which effectively forbade Hezbollah from operating south of the Litani river and called for disarming the group, but—because Israel and the U.S. had squandered their advantage—fell short of effecting either outcome.

Bush's views of the war remained unrealistic even after its conclusion, saying Lebanon's "young democracy emerged stronger for having endured the test" and the Lebanese "knew" that Hezbollah bore responsibility for the bloodshed.²⁴³ Rice was just as unrealistic, saying Hezbollah "had achieved nothing" from the war and viewing Lebanon's ability to successfully negotiate Resolution 1701 without Syrian aid

²³⁴ Rice, p. 665

²³⁵ Rice, p. 666

²³⁶ Freedman, *Choice of Enemies*, p. 479

²³⁷ Ross, p. 329; *Decision Points*, 412-413

²³⁸ Ross, p. 329

²³⁹ Rice, 475-477; Dennis Ross, *Doomed to Succeed: The U.S. – Israel Relationship From Truman to Obama*, p. 328

²⁴⁰ Ross, p. 329; Elliot Abrams, *Tested by Zion*, p.180; Rice, p.480

²⁴¹ *Decision Points*, 412-413; Rice, p. 480

²⁴² See: Rice, p.487-488

²⁴³ *Decision Points*, 414-415

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as a net positive, indicating Lebanon was ripe for further democratic growth.²⁴⁴

They were wrong on both accounts. If anything, Hezbollah had succeeded in playing the U.S. alliance with Israel against its commitments to Lebanon, and eroding March 14's confidence in the durability of U.S. support. By contrast, Iran thoroughly backed its proxy Hezbollah, both during and after the war, bolstering Shiite confidence in the group.

Not until after the war did the Bush administration begin to rethink its earlier confidence in Israel's ability to deliver. But by that time, the failure of the war, and the consequences for the U.S.—not to mention Israel itself—had already taken hold. The IDF looked like a defeated army, and Hezbollah emerged appearing victorious and more popular than before, despite taking a drubbing.²⁴⁵

Like the Clinton administration in the 1990s, the Bush administration also managed to simultaneously fail both Israel and Lebanon. The Bush administration attempted to press Israel into accepting a proposal from Siniora to incorporate a plan for UN jurisdiction over the disputed Shebaa Farms until the final delineation of the Israeli-Lebanese-Syria border as part of Resolution 1701. The logic was that securing an Israeli withdrawal from Shebaa through diplomatic means would weaken Hezbollah's argument that "resistance" was the only path to restore Arab lands.²⁴⁶ But the Israelis were in no mood for territorial concessions, rightly believing it would bolster Hezbollah, and not the Siniora government.²⁴⁷

For such a concession to effectively undercut Hezbollah's "resistance" narrative, it would have had to come after a war in which Israel was unequivocally victorious. But, given Israel's failure during the war, Hezbollah would have been able to spin any territorial concession as a victory for "resistance," as it had done with the IDF's May 2000 withdrawal from south Lebanon.²⁴⁸ The U.S. continued to pressure Israel in this regard until 2008, when Jerusalem began to relent, but talks fell apart as Israel launched its December 2008–January 2009 offensive against Hamas in Gaza.²⁴⁹

Meanwhile, Washington wouldn't front the bill for reconstructing Lebanon, pledging only \$770 million to overall reconstruction efforts. With Iran's help, by contrast, Hezbollah's Jihad al-Bina contributed \$4 billion for rebuilding efforts.²⁵⁰ For good measure, the group made sure to line the reconstructed streets with its own and Iran's flags, emphasizing that the destruction was caused by the United States and its Israeli proxy.²⁵¹

The Bush administration's excessive trust in its partners was part of the naiveté that governed the "Freedom Agenda" across the region, extending, critically, to Iraq.²⁵² In Iraq, the Bush administration placed too much trust in Nouri al-Maliki, Iraq's newly elected prime minister. Overconfidence in Middle Eastern allies paying lip service to democracy was one of the hallmarks of the Bush presidency, but Maliki was particularly undeserving. Washington trusted the new prime minister to counter Iranian

²⁴⁴ Rice, 495.

²⁴⁵ Freedman, *Choice of Enemies*, p. 469-470

²⁴⁶ Asher Kaufman, *Contested Frontiers*, 211

²⁴⁷ Kaufman, p. 212; Ben, Aluf and Eldar, Akiva. "How We Folded," *Haaretz*, July 30, 2006; Ravid, Barak. "Israel Refuses to Open Talks with Lebanon Over Shebaa Farms," *Haaretz* (Israel), October 19, 2007. <https://www.haaretz.com/1.4988208>.

²⁴⁸ Freedman, *Choice of Enemies*, p. 330-331

²⁴⁹ Abdullah, Hussein. "Rice Urges UN to Address Shebaa Farms Issue During Beirut Stop," *The Daily Star* (Lebanon), June 17, 2008.

<http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Lebanon-News/2008/Jun-17/50504-rice-urges-un-to-address-shebaa-farms-issue-during-beirut-stop.ashx>;

Bronner, Ethan and Worth, Robert F. "Israel Offers Lebanon Talks on Peace, and Land." *The New York Times*, June 19, 2008

<http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9805E4D91F38F93AA25755C0A96E9C8B63>.

²⁵⁰ Alagha, *Hizbullah's Identity Construction*, p. 125

²⁵¹ Rice, p. 556

²⁵² Rice, 4607

influence in the country, as well as that of its Shiite militia proxies.²⁵³ “I really felt good about Nouri al-Maliki,” remarked former Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice on her meeting with him. She says she was heartened by his “blunt, direct character,” and interpreted exile to Syria instead of Iran to mean, “he couldn’t stand the Iranians.” She also trusted him to calm Sunni-Shiite tensions. “When I was wheels-up from Baghdad the next day, I was more hopeful than I’d been... four months before,” says Rice.²⁵⁴ President Bush expressed more skepticism of Maliki’s abilities (but not his character) in his memoirs. Bush claims to have realized Maliki was a “political novice” from their first phone conversation, but nonetheless thought he could be aided to become a credible leader of Iraq.²⁵⁵

Maliki, however, had other ideas in mind. In fact, key leaders of these militias—including Kataeb Hezbollah’s Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis—have revealed that Maliki was aware of Hezbollah’s presence in the country and its budding relationship with local Shiite militants from the outset, and “down to the minute details.”²⁵⁶ And rather than calm Sunni-Shiite tensions, he exacerbated them. This provided an entry point for the Sunni extremist groups which would later evolve into ISIS into the Iraqi arena, ultimately benefiting Iran and providing it an excuse to expand its regional footprint.

Assassinating Imad Mughniyeh was perhaps the Bush administration’s greatest success against Hezbollah. The United States had been hunting the elusive Mughniyeh for decades. The CIA, in fact, mistakenly thought they had tracked him down in Paris in 1988. On April 7, 1995, they again had a near miss with him. After learning he was aboard a Middle East Airlines flight from Khartoum to Beirut that would transit through Riyadh, they asked the Saudis to detain him. However, fearing a backlash, an unknown Saudi official ordered air traffic control to wave off the plane, and Mughniyeh escaped again. However, seven years after putting him on the FBI’s most-wanted list, the U.S.—with help from Israel—finally caught up with Mughniyeh in Damascus on February 12, 2008, and assassinated him.²⁵⁷ The move damaged, but didn’t cripple Hezbollah, divorced as it was from a concerted strategy to pressure and degrade the group.²⁵⁸ Hezbollah, whose chain of command is such that no single person is solely responsible for important decisions, quickly rebounded and succeeded in transforming Mughniyeh into a symbol.²⁵⁹

2. Barack Obama (2009–2017)

If excessive trust in U.S. allies was the hallmark of the Bush presidency’s Middle East policy, then unjustified confidence in America’s enemies was Obama’s primary failure. Obama began his presidency with an outreach campaign towards Washington’s most implacable regional foe— Iran and Syria. In the process, he strengthened Hezbollah.

Rapprochement with an Unrepentant Syria

Barack Obama initiated a policy of rapprochement with Syria almost from the outset of taking office, relieving the pressure applied on Damascus by his predecessor. This included reappointing a U.S.

²⁵³ Rice, *No Higher Honor*, p.459-460

²⁵⁴ Rice, *No Higher Honor*, p. 460; Bush, *Decision Points*. P. 366

²⁵⁵ Bush, *Decision Points*, p. 361-362

²⁵⁶ Daoud, David. “PMF Deputy Commander Muhandis Details Hezbollah Ops in Iraq.” *The Long War Journal*. January 9, 2017 <https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2017/01/pmf-deputy-commander-muhandis-details-hezbollah-ops-in-iraq.php>

²⁵⁷ Goldman, Adam, and Ellen Nakashima. “CIA and Mossad Killed Senior Hezbollah Figure in Car Bombing.” *The Washington Post*. WP Company, January 30, 2015. https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/cia-and-mossad-killed-senior-hezbollah-figure-in-car-bombing/2015/01/30/ebb88682-968a-11e4-8005-1924ede3e54a_story.html?utm_term=.917e8f005387.

²⁵⁸ Jaber p. 51

²⁵⁹ *The Good Spy*, p. 341

ambassador to Damascus, the first since the Bush administration recalled Margaret Scobey on February 16, 2005.²⁶⁰ Several U.S. officials also traveled to Syria to engage Bashar al-Assad in dialogue aimed at restoring bilateral relations.²⁶¹ Yet, Washington demanded nothing in return for warming ties with Damascus. This not only encouraged Syria to reassert its dominance over Lebanon through indirect and covert means, but also further demoralized the already-battered March 14 alliance and reinvigorated Hezbollah. It was to the point that Prime Minister Saad Hariri felt the need to travel to Damascus for reconciliation talks with Bashar al-Assad, the man accused of ordering the assassination of his father, Rafic.²⁶²

The ISIS Crisis and the Syrian Civil War

The Obama administration appeared to reverse course with the onset of the Syrian civil war and the Assad regime's heavy-handed response to popular protests demanding political reform. Washington resisted calling for Assad to step down outright for months, but began imposing limited sanctions on Syria as early as April 2011.²⁶³ Months later, administration officials, including President Obama and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, began calling for Assad to step down.²⁶⁴ But pressure on Assad to abdicate power never went beyond rhetoric. Even Assad crossing a "red line" set by President Obama in late 2012 in using chemical weapons barely elicited a response from the U.S.

Assad's downfall would have removed one of Hezbollah's strongest supporters. Ever since being forced to withdraw his troops from Lebanon, he had relied on the group even more to continue Damascus' control over Beirut, and thus worked to ensure Hezbollah's hegemony over his western neighbor. His downfall would have permanently removed the shield behind which Hezbollah had hidden for years to grow its dominance in Lebanon, and physically cut off the group from its patron Iran by severing a critical component of Tehran's Shiite crescent. But, as Hezbollah, pro-Iranian Shiite militias, and Iran's Revolutionary Guard Corps poured in by the thousands to rescue Assad's regime, the United States gave token support to the opposition. Over time, the Free Syrian Army and other moderate rebel factions fractured and were overtaken by extremist Sunni groups like the Nusra Front and ISIS, and with a regime victory in the December 2016 battle of Aleppo, Assad and his allies were able to permanently turn the tide of the war in their favor.

Though the Syrian Civil War remains far from over, Hezbollah was able to breathe a sigh of relief and declare victory in September 2017.²⁶⁵ Instead, the United States focused its efforts exclusively on "degrading and destroying" ISIS. While eliminating the extremist Sunni group was a laudable goal, without a simultaneous strategy to prevent Hezbollah and the broader Iran-led Resistance Axis from

²⁶⁰ "Obama Nominates First US Ambassador to Syria since 2005." BBC News. BBC, February 17, 2010.

http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/8519328.stm.

²⁶¹ "US Envoy William Burns Says Syria Talks Were Candid." BBC News. BBC, February 17, 2010.

http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/8519506.stm.

²⁶² "Senator Arlen Specter Met with President Bashar Al-Asad July 8, 2010." Embassy of the United States of America in Damascus. Wayback Machine Internet Archive, July 8, 2010. <https://web.archive.org/web/20161229080109/http://damascus.usembassy.gov/media/pdf/press-releases-pdf/specter-pr.pdf>.

²⁶³ Makdessi, Marwan. "Hariri Holds 'Constructive' Talks in Syria." Reuters. Thomson Reuters, December 19, 2009.

<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-syria-lebanon/hariri-holds-constructive-talks-in-syria-idUSTRE5BI0UB20091219>.

²⁶⁴ Wilson, Scott. "How the U.S. Message on Assad Shifted." The Washington Post. WP Company, August 18, 2011.

https://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/checkpoint-washington/post/how-the-us-message-on-assad-shifted/2011/08/18/gIQAfPZxNJ_blog.html.

²⁶⁵ Wilson, Scott. "How the U.S. Message on Assad Shifted." The Washington Post. WP Company, August 18, 2011.

https://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/checkpoint-washington/post/how-the-us-message-on-assad-shifted/2011/08/18/gIQAfPZxNJ_blog.html.

Obama, Barack H. "President Obama: 'The Future of Syria Must Be Determined by Its People, but President Bashar Al-Assad Is Standing in Their Way.'" National Archives and Records Administration. August 18, 2011.

<https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/blog/2011/08/18/president-obama-future-syria-must-be-determined-its-people-president-bashar-al-assad>.

²⁶⁵ Daoud, David. "Despite Declaring Victory in Syria, Hezbollah Is Not Ready for War with Israel." UANI, United Against Nuclear Iran. October 30, 2017. <https://www.unitedagainstnucleariran.com/blog/despite-declaring-victory-syria-hezbollah-not-ready-for-war-israel>.

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benefiting from the resulting power vacuum, it only served to strengthen an equally-implacable and arguably more dangerous long-term American foe.²⁶⁶

Selling Out Lebanon

The Obama administration also did very little to give pro-Western forces within Lebanon confidence that the United States would provide them with genuine support were they to confront Hezbollah. Seeing Washington receding from the region and reengaging Syria, and still hurting from the tepid American response to Hezbollah's takeover of Beirut in May 2008, March 14 began its own attempts to reconcile with the Assad regime. Hezbollah and its political allies even managed to collapse American-allied Prime Minister Saad Hariri's first government on January 2, 2011 in the midst of a meeting with President Barack Obama, without eliciting a strong response from the U.S. administration.

Hezbollah then plunged Lebanon into a two-year presidential vacuum and political crisis, where pro-Western forces struggled against the group without any American support. In 2014, U.S. Ambassador to Lebanon David Hale even reportedly favored the election of Hezbollah's ally and preferred candidate Michel Aoun for president, thinking he could thus be lured away from his alliance with the Shiite group if Saad Hariri voted in his favor.²⁶⁷ But with Iran as the ascendant regional power—and, by extension, Hezbollah in Lebanon—Aoun had little reason to abandon his alliance with the Shiite group in favor of Hariri, who lacked any determined foreign backing. In fact, Aoun remained committed to his alliance with Hezbollah even after Saad Hariri crowned him as president in October, 2016.

Meanwhile, Hariri had permanently fractured the already-demoralized March 14 while attempting to end the presidential vacuum and spare Lebanon the damage of the continuation of the country's political crisis. Though he was reappointed as prime minister by President Aoun, he continued giving in to one Hezbollah-inspired demand after the next, realizing that the alternative could once again lead to a political deadlock or—if he pushed back too hard against the Shiite group—civil war. Disheartened by Washington abandoning the rebels to fight the Iran axis alone in Syria – and by its increasingly tepid responses to Hezbollah in Lebanon – Hariri opted to maintain his country's stability. He realized that if he were to opt for fighting Tehran and its Lebanon-based proxy, he'd have to go it alone, and he simply lacked the capability to do so. Hariri realized that Lebanon alone would suffer the consequences of a confrontation between Hezbollah and pro-Western forces, and that the Shiite group would end up winning anyway.²⁶⁸

A Nuclear Deal at Any Cost?

The Obama administration also eased direct pressure on Hezbollah as part of its overall rapprochement with Iran. It is not that Washington had any illusions about Hezbollah. In June of 2010 the administration, quoting a State Department report from three years earlier, described the Party of God as the “most technically capable terrorist group in the world,” adding that it was a “continued security threat to the

²⁶⁶ Obama, Barack H. “President Obama: ‘We Will Degrade and Ultimately Destroy ISIL.’” National Archives and Records Administration. National Archives and Records Administration, September 10, 2014. <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/blog/2014/09/10/president-obama-we-will-degrade-and-ultimately-destroy-isil>.

²⁶⁷ “Trading Policies with Hezbollah.” The Majalla Magazine. Wayback Machine Internet Archive, April 29, 2014. <https://web.archive.org/web/20151214155052/http://eng.majalla.com/2014/04/article55249734>.

²⁶⁸ Carnegie Endowment. “Carnegie Endowment Live Stream [Meeting with PM Saad Hariri].” *Youtube*, 1:04:18. July 26, 2017. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vbrSLn9EIYs>

United States.”²⁶⁹ The administration was also acutely aware that Hezbollah’s drug-smuggling activities – particularly in Latin America – posed a threat to U.S. national security.²⁷⁰

But easing up on Hezbollah was part of the price Obama was willing to pay to secure a nuclear deal with its sponsor, Iran. To this end, Obama was much less willing than his predecessor to describe Hezbollah as a terrorist organization.²⁷¹ In fact, rumors began to emerge in 2013, based on anonymous “U.S. sources,”— of direct and indirect contact between U.S. officials – from CIA and DoD – and Hezbollah. These anonymous sources denied these contacts were in any way related to nuclear negotiations with Iran, and the U.S. Embassy in Beirut denied their existence outright.²⁷² However, unnamed March 14 officials also claimed that the Embassy was indirectly engaging Hezbollah, with relations “improving steadily.” These same sources claimed that U.S. Ambassador to Beirut David Hale had signaled American acceptance of Hezbollah’s place in Lebanon’s political pantheon, telling his Lebanese interlocutors that “no government can be formed in Lebanon without Hezbollah in it.”²⁷³ The administration even allegedly indirectly passed on information to Hezbollah about planned ISIS attacks, and securing the deal with Iran influenced the administration’s decisions when it came to targeting the group’s international drug-smuggling activities, even as it was allegedly funneling cocaine into the United States.²⁷⁴

Part IV. The New Trump Administration: Conclusions and Recommendations

Section A. Trump and Hezbollah

When President Donald Trump took office, Iran’s – and by extension, Hezbollah’s – prospects were on the rise, and U.S. allies across the region were on the defensive against Tehran. Trump’s campaign rhetoric promised to roll back the Islamic Republic’s influence, but it also provided loopholes for Iran and its Lebanon-based proxy to exploit. Chief among them was Trump’s softness on Syrian dictator Bashar al-Assad, and his acquiescence to Russian interference in Syria, both critical factors to Hezbollah’s

²⁶⁹ “Country Reports on Terrorism 2006,” April 30, 2007. <https://2009-2017.state.gov/j/ct/rls/crt/2006/index.htm>;
“ASSESSING THE STRENGTH OF HEZBOLLAH.” COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN RELATIONS UNITED STATES SENATE. U.S. Government Publishing Office, June 8, 2010. <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/CHRG-111shrg62141/html/CHRG-111shrg62141.htm>.
<https://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/CHRG-111shrg62141/html/CHRG-111shrg62141.htm>;

²⁷⁰ “DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE AUTHORIZATION FOR APPROPRIATIONS FOR FISCAL YEAR 2010.” COMMITTEE ON ARMED SERVICES UNITED STATES SENATE . Government Publishing Office, March 17, 2009. <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/CHRG-111shrg52620/pdf/CHRG-111shrg52620.pdf#page=61>.

²⁷¹ James Worrall, Simon Mabon, and Gordon Clubb, *Hezbollah: From Islamic Resistance to Government*. p. 17; Sirriyeh, Hussain. “The US, Hezbollah and the Idea of Sub-State Terrorism.” Taylor & Francis, September 28, 2012. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/13537121.2012.717395?journalCode=fisa20>.

²⁷² “Report: Hizbullah Engaged in Direct Contacts with CIA, Pentagon.” Naharnet, December 13, 2013.

<http://www.naharnet.com/stories/en/109751-report-hizbullah-engaged-in-direct-contacts-with-cia-pentagon;>

; “U.S. Embassy Denies Holding Talks with ‘Terrorist Hizbullah!’” Naharnet, November 5, 2013. <http://www.naharnet.com/stories/en/104521-u-s-embassy-denies-holding-talks-with-terrorist-hizbullah>.

²⁷³ “Are There Channels of Communication Between Hezbollah and the American Embassy?” Al-Anba, November 3, 2013.

<https://www.alanba.com.kw/ar/arabic-international-news/lebanon-news/420178/04-11-2013-هل-قنوات-اتصال-بين-حزب-الله-والسفارة-الاميركية-3>.

“Report: Indirect Talks between Hizbullah, U.S. over Government Formation.” Naharnet, November 4, 2013.

<http://www.naharnet.com/stories/en/104305-report-indirect-talks-between-hizbullah-u-s-over-government-formation>.

<http://www.naharnet.com/stories/en/104305-report-indirect-talks-between-hizbullah-u-s-over-government-formation>

Prothero, Mitchell. “Lebanese Officials Say CIA Warned Them of Imminent Al Qaida Attack on Hezbollah.” mcclatchydc. McClatchy Washington Bureau, July 15, 2013. <https://www.mcclatchydc.com/news/nation-world/world/article24751093.html>;

Levitt, Matthew A. “Matthew Levitt: In Search of Nuance.” Lawfare , March 20, 2018. <https://www.lawfareblog.com/matthew-levitt-search-nuance>.

survival.²⁷⁵ In fact, Trump’s approach to the Middle East was almost identical to President Barack Obama’s, even if it was phrased more bluntly: disengagement from the region, an almost-exclusive focus on defeating ISIS, and hinting at a belief in common-ground with Iran’s “Resistance Axis”—at least Bashar al-Assad’s Syria—in achieving that goal.²⁷⁶ Assad was receptive to this approach, and repeatedly voiced support for Trump and his policies, calling him a “natural ally” for Syria, “the Russians, the Iranians, and many other countries.”²⁷⁷

The Trump administration has almost completed its four-year term. Despite taking bold Iran policy actions like the maximum pressure campaign on the regime in Tehran and assassinating Quds Force commander Qassem Soleimani, these have not been followed up with a concerted strategy of tackling Hezbollah. Moreover, the long-term efficacy of what measures have been put in place remains to be seen. So far, the administration has largely relied on sanctions, to the exclusion of other non-kinetic means of pressuring Tehran and its proxies.

On the positive side, State and Treasury have continued taking action against Hezbollah leaders, figures, and financiers, respectively, issuing rewards for information leading to their capture and sanctioning them.²⁷⁸ The United States—largely Congress—has also called on Lebanon to continue pushing Hezbollah out of the Lebanese financial and banking system, as part of a concerted American effort to target the group’s finances.²⁷⁹ U.S. support for the Lebanese state and army have also remained constant, despite short-sighted calls from some parties to halt aid.²⁸⁰ President Trump hosted then Lebanese Prime Minister Saad Hariri at the White House to reaffirm American support for Lebanon and a desire to roll back Hezbollah.²⁸¹ The support continued through former Prime Minister Saad Hariri’s surprise resignation in November 2017, in protest of Hezbollah’s harmful activities to Lebanon, and former

²⁷⁵ CNN. “Donald Trump: ‘Let Russia Fight ISIS’ (CNN Interview with Erin Burnett).” *YouTube*, 05:19. September 28, 2015. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cJHgA4_0CAo; “A Donald Trump Anti-ISIS Campaign That Spares Assad Would Only Empower Hezbollah.” *Newsweek*, December 6, 2016. <https://www.newsweek.com/trump-anti-isis-campaign-spare-assad-will-only-empower-hezbollah-528559>.

²⁷⁶ CBSN. “Donald Trump, Jeb Bush get heated over Syria, national security.” *Youtube*, 03:02. February 13, 2016. <https://youtu.be/INRdArOAOQs?t=2m2s>; US Presidential Debates. “Fifth Primary Debate – Main Stage – December 15 2015 on CNN.” *YouTube*, 2:17:32. March 22, 2016. <https://youtu.be/YHYk0K7iszo?t=1h24m17s>

²⁷⁷ “Trump Travel Ban Targeted ‘Terrorists’ Not Syrian People, Assad Says.” *Naharnet*, February 16, 2017.

<http://www.naharnet.com/stories/en/225560-trump-travel-ban-targeted-terrorists-not-syrian-people-assad-says>.

; Meuse, Alison. “Assad Regime Hopes Trump Will Cut U.S. Support To Syrian Rebels.” *NPR*. *NPR*, November 10, 2016.

https://www.npr.org/2016/11/10/501537279/assad-regime-hopes-trump-would-cut-u-s-support-syrian-rebel-groups?utm_campaign=storyshare.

²⁷⁸ “Most Wanted - Fuad Shukur.” *Rewards For Justice*. U.S. Department of State. Accessed September 1, 2020.

https://rewardsforjustice.net/english/fuad_shukur.html; “Most Wanted - Talal Hamiyah.” *Rewards For Justice*. U.S. Department of State. Accessed September 1, 2020. https://rewardsforjustice.net/english/talal_hamiyah.html; “Rewards for Justice - Reward Offer for Information on Hizballah Key Leaders Talal Hamiyah and Fu'ad Shukur.” U.S. Department of State. *Wayback Machine Internet Archive*, October 10, 2017.

<https://web.archive.org/web/20190111213704/https://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2017/10/274722.htm>.

²⁷⁹ Barrington, Lisa. “U.S. Stresses Lebanon Must Cut Hezbollah from Financial System.” *Reuters*. *Thomson Reuters*, January 23, 2018.

<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-lebanon-economy-hezbollah/u-s-stresses-lebanon-must-cut-hezbollah-from-financial-system-idUSKBN1FC35Y>.

²⁸⁰ “Background Briefing: Updating on Secretary Tillerson’s Trip to Amman, Jordan; Ankara, Turkey; Beirut, Lebanon; Cairo, Egypt; and Kuwait City, Kuwait.” U.S. Department of State. *Wayback Machine Internet Archive*, February 14, 2018.

<https://web.archive.org/web/20181222015256/https://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2018/02/278339.htm>; Department of State. *Twitter Post*. December 7, 2017, 08:23 PM. <https://twitter.com/StateDept/status/938941992276561920>; Daoud, David. A. *Twitter Post*. February 27, 2018, 4:51 PM. <https://twitter.com/DavidADAoud/status/968604470564282369>; “Gen. Aoun Meets Head of US Central Command in Washington.”

Naharnet, October 25, 2017. <http://www.naharnet.com/stories/en/237249-gen-aoun-meets-head-of-us-central-command-in-washington>; THE REPUBLICAN STUDY COMMITTEE’S TASKFORCE ON NATIONAL SECURITY AND FOREIGN AFFAIRS, “THE RSC NATIONAL SECURITY STRATEGY: Strengthening America & Countering Global Threats,” *The Republican Study Committee*, accessed September 1, 2020, <https://rsc-johnson.house.gov/sites/replicanstudycommittee.house.gov/files/%5BFINAL%5D%20NSTF%20Report.pdf#page=52>.

²⁸¹ ABC News. “President Donald Trump remarks with Lebanon PM Saad Hariri.” *YouTube*, 36:49. July 25, 2017.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fQ-MOI28SbA>.

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Secretary of State Rex Tillerson's February 2018 tour of the Middle East.²⁸² The Trump administration also emphasized the continued threat Hezbollah poses to the U.S. homeland.²⁸³ More recently, Trump withdrew the United States from the Iran nuclear deal on May 8, 2018, emphasizing U.S. opposition to Iran's terrorism and regional activities, in which Hezbollah plays a central role.²⁸⁴ The following week, the administration followed up with a cascade of Treasury Department sanctions on Iran's Central Bank, members of Hezbollah's top leadership in the Shura Council, and several Hezbollah financiers.²⁸⁵ In July 2019, the U.S. government also sanctioned two Hezbollah legislators, Amin Sherri and Mohammad Raad. This was the first time Washington had targeted two sitting members of parliament.²⁸⁶ Likewise, the next month, the Trump administration sanctioned Jammal Trust Bank SAL—which it called Hezbollah's "bank of choice."²⁸⁷

Nonetheless, this is not the comprehensive strategy for dealing with Hezbollah the president promised to produce within 24 hours of his July 25, 2017 press conference with former Prime Minister Saad Hariri.²⁸⁸ U.S. financial sanctions on the group – particularly its leadership – are largely symbolic in effect. These sanctions will also do little to curtail the group's finances so long as its non-military entities are permitted to conduct financial and fund-raising activities in Europe and elsewhere where only its military "wing" is criminalized. While U.S. efforts have led allies like the United Kingdom and Germany to finally end their artificial distinction between the group's wings, attitudes of other critical countries – like France – remain unchanged on the matter.

The Trump administration's policies also remain inadequate when it comes to Hezbollah's enablers: Iran, Syria, and Russia. In the case of Bashar al-Assad, though President Trump has now twice targeted the regime for its chemical attacks in Khan Shaykhun and Douma, both retaliatory strikes were largely symbolic and not part of a concerted and consistent policy meant to increase American leverage in Syria, or to properly keep Assad in check.²⁸⁹ The efficacy of the recently-enacted Caesar Act remains to be seen.²⁹⁰ Moreover, Trump's more isolationist tendencies risk the mistakes of previous administrations, but on a more explicit scale, which will continue to embolden Iran despite U.S. withdrawal from the JCPOA.

²⁸² Tillerson, Rex. "On the Situation in Lebanon." U.S. Department of State, November 10, 2017.

<https://web.archive.org/web/20180105113106/https://www.state.gov/secretary/remarks/2017/11/275454.htm>.

; Tillerson, Rex, and Saad Hariri. "Press Availability With Lebanese Prime Minister Saad Hariri." U.S. Department of State, February 15, 2018.

<https://web.archive.org/web/20180218194928/https://www.state.gov/secretary/remarks/2018/02/278367.htm>.

²⁸³ Labott, Elise, and Laura Koran. "US Officials Warn of Potential Hezbollah Threat to US Homeland." CNN. Cable News Network, October 11, 2017. <https://www.cnn.com/2017/10/10/politics/us-warn-hezbollah-threat/index.html>.

²⁸⁴ Washington Post. "Watch Trump's full statement on U.S. withdrawing from Iran nuclear deal." *YouTube*, 12:40. May 8, 2018.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=goE77-rY78g>

²⁸⁵ "Treasury and the Terrorist Financing Targeting Center Partner Together to Sanction Hizballah's Senior Leadership ." U.S. Department of the Treasury, May 16, 2018. <https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/sm0387>.

"Treasury Targets Key Hizballah Financing Network and Iranian Conduit." U.S. Department of the Treasury, May 17, 2018. "Treasury and the Terrorist Financing Targeting Center Partner Together to Sanction Hizballah's Senior Leadership." U.S. Department of the Treasury, May 17, 2018. <https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/sm0387>;

"Treasury Targets Iran's Central Bank Governor and an Iraqi Bank Moving Millions of Dollars for IRGC-Qods Force." U.S. Department of the Treasury, May 15, 2018. <https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/sm0385>.

²⁸⁶ Mroue, Bassem. "US Sanctions Squeezing Iran-Backed Hezbollah in Lebanon." AP NEWS. Associated Press, October 4, 2019.

<https://apnews.com/a37836f1f39f40028710c2ad226a7760>.

²⁸⁷ Riechmann, Deb. "US Sanctions Lebanese Bank for Helping Iran-Backed Hezbollah." AP NEWS. Associated Press, August 29, 2019.

<https://apnews.com/f0398cf72e024f40a7c56778c66f407c>.

²⁸⁸ ABC News. "President Donald Trump remarks with Lebanon PM Saad Hariri." *YouTube*, 36:49. July 25, 2017. [https://youtu.be/fQ-](https://youtu.be/fQ-MQI28SbA?t=11m)

[MQI28SbA?t=11m](https://youtu.be/fQ-MQI28SbA?t=11m)

²⁸⁹ Gordon, Michael R., Helene Cooper, and Michael D. Shear. "Dozens of U.S. Missiles Hit Air Base in Syria." *The New York Times*. *The New York Times*, April 6, 2017. [https://www.nytimes.com/2017/04/06/world/middleeast/us-said-to-weigh-military-responses-to-syrian-chemical-](https://www.nytimes.com/2017/04/06/world/middleeast/us-said-to-weigh-military-responses-to-syrian-chemical-attack.html#:~:text=)

[attack.html#:~:text=](https://www.nytimes.com/2017/04/06/world/middleeast/us-said-to-weigh-military-responses-to-syrian-chemical-attack.html#:~:text=)

²⁹⁰ Chulov, Martin. "US 'Caesar Act' Sanctions Could Devastate Syria's Flatlining Economy." *The Guardian*. *Guardian News and Media*, June 12, 2020. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/jun/12/us-caesar-act-sanctions-and-could-devastate-syrias-flatlining-economy>.

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One of the main American failures in confronting Hezbollah has been a lack of consistent involvement and proactive action against the group. For the U.S. to signal a retreat from the region means a less direct interest in Lebanon, the main battleground between Hezbollah and Washington. For pro-Western and democratic forces to succeed in rolling back the group's influence in the country, they will need active support; and their adversaries must know that America is behind them. Otherwise, Hezbollah can overwhelm them with its own power and the unconditional and comprehensive Iranian backing it receives.

Section B. Recommendations

1. The United States must combat Hezbollah in a holistic manner

Much of the United States' efforts against Hezbollah have been targeted almost exclusively at cutting its funding. Even that has met with only limited success, as evidenced by the continued and exponential growth of the group's military and social services apparatus. In order to defeat Hezbollah, Washington must begin to study and understand the root causes of the group's strength and growth, and strive to undercut it in all of those ways simultaneously. America must target Hezbollah at every level, waging an ideological war at the grassroots to turn the hearts and minds of Lebanese Shiites against the group, and a diplomatic and financial effort aimed at its suppliers, enablers, backers, and sympathizers. Simultaneously, Washington must support alternatives and rivals to the group, and in doing so it must show the same unwavering commitment to these countries, groups, and entities that Iran shows to its Lebanon-based proxy.

Monetarily: Much of the United States' efforts to dry up Hezbollah's funds has been targeted at its funding from Iran,²⁹¹ and its financing—either directly or via affiliated businessmen—through illicit means. U.S. officials have also assured themselves that the group is collapsing under the weight of sanctions based on a misunderstood solicitation of funds by its Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah during a March 8, 2019 speech.²⁹² But Hezbollah also has a vast network of fundraising that would be otherwise legitimate, had it not been run by a terrorist organization. This includes investments, legitimate businesses in and out of Lebanon, and a well-organized system of charitable donations and contributions from supporters and sympathizers in Lebanon and abroad.

Militarily: The United States must find ways to undercut Hezbollah's military strength. This does not have to take the form of kinetic operations by the U.S. against Hezbollah in Lebanon or abroad, unless in self-defense. It should be focused on depriving Hezbollah of arms. Methods of accomplishing this can be the extension of UN Resolution 1701 and UNIFIL's mandate to the Syrian-Lebanese border. The United States should encourage British-German support for the Lebanese Army's Land Border Project to be contingent on preventing *all* weapons smuggling across the border from Syria into Lebanon, and not just

²⁹¹ Karam, Joyce. "US Envoy Brian Hook: Sanctions Are Hurting Iran's \$700m Support for Hezbollah." *The National*. The National, March 22, 2019. <https://www.thenational.ae/world/the-americas/us-envoy-brian-hook-sanctions-are-hurting-iran-s-700m-support-for-hezbollah-1.840133>.

²⁹² "WEBINAR: Keeping Pressure on Iran through the U.N. Security Council: A Conversation with Brian Hook." *The Heritage Foundation*, June 9, 2020. <https://www.heritage.org/middle-east/event/webinar-keeping-pressure-iran-through-the-un-security-council-conversation-brian>.

; "Under Secretary Mandelker Remarks at the 19th Annual International Conference on Counterterrorism." U.S. Department of the Treasury, September 11, 2019. <https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/sm773>.

; "Press Briefing with Nathan A. Sales, Ambassador at Large and Coordinator for Counterterrorism - United States Department of State." U.S. Department of State, December 16, 2019. <https://www.state.gov/briefing-with-nathan-a-sales-ambassador-at-large-and-coordinator-for-counterterrorism/>;

; "The Secretary General's Speech - The Thirtieth Anniversary of the Establishment of the Islamic Resistance Support Association." *Al-Manar Television*, March 8, 2019. <http://program.almanar.com.lb/episode/55849>.

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to Sunni militants.²⁹³ Washington should also increase intelligence-sharing with the Israelis on any overland weapons shipments to Hezbollah via Syria that Israel may not have intercepted itself, including the location of alleged underground weapons-transfer tunnels across the Syrian-Lebanese border. The United States should also aid and strengthen the capabilities of the Israeli, Saudi, and Egyptian navies to detect and intercept any sea-borne weapons shipments to Hezbollah that may come near their territorial waters. The U.S. must diplomatically and financially pressure Russia to control the flow of weapons to Hezbollah in Syria, and if any weapons are making their way to Hezbollah overland via Iraq, the government in Baghdad must also be held accountable and pressured to control its borders.

Above all, however, the U.S. must go after the source by applying pressure on Iran to limit its ability to transfer weapons, military materiel, or weapons-manufacturing knowledge to Hezbollah.

Ideologically: The U.S. cannot directly counter Hezbollah’s ideology, because it is couched in the legitimacy of Shiite religious doctrine, and Washington is no authority on the matter. However, Shiite Islam is not a monolith, and many high-respected Shiite scholars oppose the group’s *Wilayat al-Faqih* ideology. But they lack the resources to disseminate their message as widely as Hezbollah. Lacking any armed force, they are also intimidated into accommodating Hezbollah and Iran, despite what they may think of them privately.

The United States must assist these clerics in obtaining a wider platform to compete with Hezbollah’s ideology. They are bound to find receptive ears, as Lebanese Shiite society is not a pro-Hezbollah monolith and would likely welcome an authentic Shiite alternative that is both faithful to tradition but also does not require them to sacrifice their lives on the altar of Iran’s regional ambitions.

Socially: The U.S. must encourage and aid the development of a genuine Lebanese Shiite civil society that acts as a nationalist Lebanese alternative to Hezbollah’s vast social and political services apparatus. However, as with the ideological approach, in order to be credible this must not appear to be a pro-American effort. Instead, the United States must encourage the development of a confident and independent Lebanese Shiite voice, that adequately addresses the community’s political, social, and economic concerns, but that owes ultimate loyalty to Lebanon alone. Washington and New York cannot replace Tehran and Qom. Moreover, decades of U.S. blunders, support for some of Israel’s worst excesses, and Hezbollah’s propaganda have combined to create an understandable level of distrust among Lebanese Shiites—particularly Hezbollah’s support base—of anything “Made in the U.S.A.” Therefore, this must appear to be as non-American an effort as possible, and support can even be funneled through credible American allies—like France or others—which the Shiites do not mistrust.

Politically: The United States’ allies in Lebanon, the March 14 alliance, are disunited and demoralized. This is partially due to Lebanon’s traditionally fractious and shifting politics, and in part because of the inconsistent and seemingly half-hearted nature of American support since the Cedar Revolution. Washington’s goal must be to strengthen, re-unify, and reinvigorate March 14, particularly former Prime Minister Saad Hariri and his Mustaqbal Movement.

²⁹³ “UK-German MOU in Support of the Lebanese Army.” GOV.UK, September 26, 2017. <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/uk-german-mou-in-support-of-the-lebanese-army>; Barrington, Lisa, and Issam Abdallah. “Lebanese Military Gets U.S., British Aid for Defending Border with Syria.” Edited by Mark Heinrich. Reuters. Thomson Reuters, March 31, 2016. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-lebanon-military-aid/lebanese-military-gets-u-s-british-aid-for-defending-border-with-syria-idUSKCN0WX1HY>.

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It must also try to peel away the Amal Movement and the Free Patriotic Movement from Hezbollah by making the group a less attractive political partner or at least making the costs of their alliance with Hezbollah outweigh the political benefits. After all, these two parties, to which Hezbollah currently owes much of its political strength, are not its natural or ideological allies. The United States can do this by supporting dependable and credible rivals to Hezbollah in Lebanon, within and without the Shiite community. The goal of these rivals must be to provide the Lebanese as a whole—but particularly the Shiites—the same benefits and legitimate rights they derive from Hezbollah, but with ultimate loyalty being owed to Lebanon and its interests rather than Iran.

2. The United States Must Lead an International Effort Against Hezbollah

Hezbollah has classified the U.S. as its primary enemy. Therefore, it is only fitting that Washington takes the lead in degrading and destroying the group, with our partners taking on secondary roles assigned by Washington. Several American allies—including Israel and the Gulf States—share Washington’s opposition to Hezbollah and a desire for the group’s demise. However, their efforts often operate at cross-purposes with each other – for example, with the Israelis threatening to target the Lebanese state and its institutions in a future war with Hezbollah, pro-Western Lebanese political forces constantly demonizing the Israelis, and the Saudis and the Gulf States withdrawing their support from Beirut altogether. By doing so, each party not only undercuts its own efforts against Hezbollah, but also U.S. interests and policies.

A coalition effort must prevail, instead of this haphazard and *ad hoc* approach to combatting the group, which has left Hezbollah much room to maneuver over the decades. Just as the United States formed coalitions to defeat Al-Qaeda and ISIS, so too must it do so regarding Hezbollah, with the unmistakable message that this is an American-led effort. Each of our partners must fall in line with an overall policy set forth by Washington, with each country and partner assuming a role that plays to their strengths vis-à-vis Hezbollah.

The United States must lead an *international* effort to criminalize all components and subsidiaries of Hezbollah. Washington must work to end the European Union’s, France’s, and other countries’ artificial distinction between Hezbollah’s so-called “political” and “military” wings. American partners across the globe must be made to understand that all aspects and components of Hezbollah act in an interlocking and mutually reinforcing manner—as the party itself readily admits—and to allow one component to continue operating freely would provide the most destructive aspects of Hezbollah’s ideology and actions a continued lease on life. Money, after all, is fungible, and charitable funds raised by the group’s political components often make their way into the hands of its “resistance” fighters. Hezbollah can also use its non-military entities to continue disseminating its ideology and propaganda, gaining sympathizers and recruiting foot-soldiers, and thus continuing to expand its footprint in Lebanon and abroad. Without an international effort to put an end to all aspects of Hezbollah, the overall effectiveness of any U.S. action will be limited. Without an international blanket ban on any and all Hezbollah and Hezbollah-related activities, the group will continue to survive and grow.

Israel’s role would be primarily military and intelligence based. As part of maximizing Israel’s role, the United States must pressure Jerusalem to end its bellicose rhetoric against Lebanon and its state institutions. It must also push the IDF from its traditional heavy-handed approach to fighting in the Lebanese arena, and jointly lay down a smart war strategy that maximizes damage to Hezbollah while minimizing the harm to Lebanon and its civilians, and thus the group’s ability to use the Israeli war effort for its propaganda. Washington must ensure that any future war undertaken by the IDF will be measured a

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scalpel, and not a sledgehammer—and not work at cross-ends with American interests in Lebanon, and ultimately Israeli interests as well.

While Israel can serve as the U.S.’ “eyes and ears” against Hezbollah, past experience has indicated that Jerusalem – like any other country – has interests of its own in Lebanon that naturally do not fully coincide with Washington’s. The United States must therefore develop its own intelligence assets in the country, at the very least to act as a method to verify the information received from its allies.

The Gulf states’ role is primarily financial. The Saudis must aid in rehabilitating and rebuilding Lebanon and its institutions, including in south Lebanon and among the Shiites. They have done so in the past, particularly in the wake of the 2006 war between Israel and Hezbollah, but they were not as vocal as the Iranians or Hezbollah in doing so. This was a mistake, as the war with Hezbollah is also one of perception. Saudi and Gulf efforts in Lebanon must be made public, and if they must festoon areas with their flags and national symbols, all the better. In this way, the Gulf States will impress upon Lebanon’s Shiites that they have their best interests at heart and, unlike Iran, will not ask them to act as cannon-fodder for their regional ambitions, rivalries, or wars.

European, Latin American, African, and Asian partners must also play a role, primarily in drying up Hezbollah’s sources of funding on these continents, tightening sanctions against the group, and hindering the ability of its members to move across their territories. Where the United States lacks the clout to encourage countries in these continents to take these measures, our Arab or Israeli partners can fill that role instead.

The largest burden, however, will be upon Lebanon itself. All of this effort will be for naught if Beirut does not take efforts on the ground to counter Hezbollah socially, ideologically, political, financially and – finally – militarily. While the United States must take into consideration Lebanon’s social and military limitations, and the possibility that pushing too hard against Hezbollah all at once is unfeasible for the Lebanese and could lead to civil war, that should not become a *carte blanche* for wholesale Lebanese inaction. While the Lebanese government may have little choice but to make allowances for Hezbollah’s political activities or electoral fundraising efforts – because to do otherwise would anger many Lebanese Shiites by giving them the impression that their voice is being silenced – there is still much else Lebanon *can* do. Beirut must be held accountable for areas where it is able to act without heading down the slippery slope to a civil war, but chooses not to. The United States must encourage its Lebanese partners – through a combination of carrots and sticks – to undertake all actions of which they are capable, and provide them with the confidence that we will credibly support them every step of the way. Joint U.S.-Lebanese commissions can be established to determine exactly where the Lebanese can safely push back against Hezbollah, and how most effectively to do so.

Above all, the effort against Hezbollah requires patience. Destroying the group will not happen overnight or in one fell swoop. It is too entrenched in Lebanon and its Shiite community for that to be realistic. Instead, Hezbollah’s demise will come through a slow process of erosion, a reversal of the gradual approach taken by the group to reach its current strength.