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Chairman King, Subcommittee Ranking Member Higgins, Full Committee Ranking Member Thompson, distinguished members of the subcommittee, I am grateful for the opportunity to testify today on this very important subject.¹

If one were to identify the biggest accomplishment of Iranian foreign policy since the 1979 Islamic revolution, it would be, in my judgment, the direct contribution to the creation and subsequent development of Hezbollah, the Lebanese Shi’ite party. I believe that Hezbollah is one of the most powerful sub-national militant actors operating in the world today. It has global

¹ This testimony draws on my research work in Lebanon, my scholarship on Hezbollah, and on a recently coauthored paper with Dr. Daniel Byman, “Hezbollah in a Time of Transition” (Washington, DC: Atlantic Council and Brookings, November 2014)

http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/images/publications/Hezbollah_in_a_Time_of_Transition.pdf

reach; intelligence, counterintelligence, and military capabilities that are more significant than many mid-sized European countries; and regional political clout that tops that of many Middle Eastern governments.

The main question that is on the minds of Hezbollah observers is whether the group's domestic and regional position has been strengthened or weakened as a result of its overt involvement in the Syrian conflict. That is what I will focus on in my testimony today. My bottom line is that while the war in Syria presents Hezbollah with the biggest challenge it has faced since it was born, it also creates opportunities. The worst case scenario of Damascus falling into the hands of the rebels—a scenario that currently looks improbable—will make Hezbollah's life extremely difficult, but it will not end it. At the other extreme, should the rebels suffer a total defeat, Hezbollah would further assert itself regionally and cement its control of Lebanon. The continuation of the status quo, where neither the Syrian opposition nor the regime wins and the civil war goes on, will not lead to Hezbollah's demise either. An indefinite stalemate is costly for Hezbollah because it does not solve the problem of Syrian spillover, it prolongs political tensions in Beirut, and it keeps Lebanon and Hezbollah's Shi'ite supporters at risk of attack by Sunni extremists—but it also does not force Hezbollah and Iran to make drastic decisions and tough compromises.

So regardless of what happens in Syria, Hezbollah will most probably survive if it continues to effectively nurture and manage two critical relationships: its Shi'ite support base and its main patron, Iran. These two sources of support matter more to the wellbeing of the organization than anything else. Currently, neither relationship looks volatile. While the bond between Hezbollah and its constituency is under pressure due to the group's costly intervention in Syria, cracks have yet to emerge. Growing instability and Sunni extremist violence in the region may have even strengthened ties between Hezbollah and its Shi'ite supporters. As for the group's deep and organic link to Iran, it will most likely endure and become stronger following the lifting of international sanctions against Tehran and the inflow of cash to the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), Hezbollah's primary ally within the Iranian government.

Hezbollah's future has important implications for Lebanon, the region's stability, and US interests and those of its partners in the Middle East. The Syrian conflict has forced Hezbollah to transition into something it does not necessarily desire or is able to sustain. A movement that long claimed to transcend sectarianism has become a bogeyman to many of the region's Sunni Muslims. At the same time, Hezbollah's deep involvement in the fighting in Syria has damaged its reputation in Lebanon and made it a target of Sunni extremist violence. The conflict with Israel, while still a focus of rhetoric, has somewhat faded to the background. However, the suggestion that the significant pressures Hezbollah is dealing with will ultimately lead to its death represents nothing but wishful thinking. The party is more resilient than its adversaries would like to admit. That the tide of the war in Syria seems to be turning in its favor also provides comfort for the organization.

My testimony contains four parts. I begin by describing various storms that Hezbollah effectively weathered in the past and explain how it did so. I then devote two sections to analyze how events in the region over the past five years and particularly the conflict in Syria present

challenges as well as opportunities to the group. I conclude by discussing the policy implications and recommendations for the United States.

Past Storms

Hezbollah's death has been proclaimed numerous times since its inception in the early 1980s, but the Shi'ite party has survived numerous challenges: three high-intensity military conflicts with Israel in 1993, 1996, and 2006; Israel's assassination of several of its core leaders, including Sheikh Ragheb Harb in 1984, Abbas Al-Musawi in 1992, and Imad Mughniyeh in 2008; the Syrian departure from Lebanon in 2005; a non-stop war of intelligence and counterintelligence against Israel; various political crises in Beirut; an international tribunal investigating the February 2005 murder of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri that formally accused four Hezbollah members; and Arab uprisings that profoundly challenged its philosophy of "champion of the downtrodden, underprivileged, and disenfranchised."

How Hezbollah has survived all these crises can be attributed to a number of internal and external factors, including leadership, organizational coherence and discipline, political violence and tactics, superior training, and, of course, Syrian assistance. But all this would count for little without the constant support Hezbollah receives from its Shi'ite constituency and from Iran. Unlike many other non-state actors in the region, Hezbollah has a domestic base of support about which it cares deeply, and this concern is reciprocated. The organization has made it a top priority to cultivate good relations with the Lebanese Shi'a, knowing full well that such ties would serve as its first and last lines of defense. Iran not only provides religious guidance and strategic direction to Hezbollah, but also helps the party solidify its bond with its constituency through money and weapons.

Challenges

By intervening in Syria to come to Syrian President Bashar Assad's aid, Hassan Nasrallah, Hezbollah's Secretary General, has put his party on a collision course with Sunnis—moderates and extremists alike—in Syria and Lebanon, and elsewhere in the region. This course of action is very risky for Hezbollah and its constituency because regional demographics have always worked against the Shi'ites. Even the staunchest Lebanese Shi'ite supporters of Hezbollah would prefer peace with their fellow Sunni Lebanese—and the region—to conflict. It is not just that Sunni radicals, despite Hezbollah's military advances in Syria, have been able to penetrate deep into the Shi'ite party's sphere of influence and wreak havoc. More importantly, the same extremists who Nasrallah was hoping to fight outside Lebanon could turn Lebanon into another Iraq, a country defined by Sunni-Shi'ite sectarian violence. In this scenario, whose chances are unclear, Hezbollah stands to lose the most, because another Lebanese civil war would be a major distraction from the military struggle against Israel.²

At home, Hezbollah may have contained the effects of the Special Tribunal for Lebanon (STL), but the international institution has already caused considerable damage to the party's

² Daniel Byman and Bilal Y. Saab, "Hezbollah Hesitates? The Group's Uncertain Transformation," *Foreign Affairs*, January 21, 2015 <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/israel/2015-01-21/hezbollah-hesitates>

reputation by instilling serious doubts, even among Hezbollah's friends, about the party's role in killing Rafik Hariri, the former Lebanese prime minister and leader of the Sunni community in the country, in addition to several other anti-Syrian Lebanese politicians, journalists, and security personnel.³

More broadly, the Arab uprisings have arguably made Hezbollah less relevant in Arab political discourse. While the concept of resistance against Israel will always generate strong emotions and resonate deeply in the Arab world, such a struggle, an increasing number of Arabs now believe, cannot be at the expense of freedom and political-economic rights. Hezbollah and Iran clearly think otherwise; for them, nothing takes precedence over the military struggle because no other form of resistance works. The group's intervention in Syria has shattered its image in the Arab street. Although such a street has always been polarized, the average Arab person, not too long ago, used to adore the party for standing up to Israel and the United States. Not anymore. Hezbollah's flags are being burned in Syria and elsewhere.⁴

Hezbollah's fight in Syria also has made it more vulnerable toward Israel. Another war with Israel may pump life into Hezbollah's hardcore cadres and add fire to its resistance approach, but in reality such an extremely risky adventure could entail massive costs from which the group may not recover easily this time around. Iran could immediately send money for reconstruction purposes like it did after the end of the 2006 war, but that is not inevitable. And the Syrian regime, busy fighting for its life, may not be operationally capable of providing necessary military and logistical support during any such war.

For Hezbollah, the military challenge in Syria is more daunting than in the Lebanese theater. In contrast to southern Lebanon, Hezbollah forces do not have an intimate knowledge of the Syrian terrain. In addition, they must cooperate with irregular and regular Syrian forces and Iraqi militias, rather than just rely on their own fighters. Hezbollah frequently operates at the company and even battalion level in Syria, using far larger formations than it usually has had in Lebanon when it waged guerilla war against Israel. As Islamic State fighters advanced in Iraq, many of the Iraqi Shi'ite militias aiding the Assad regime went home to fight, increasing the burden on Hezbollah. Because of its heavy role in Syria, Hezbollah is more militarily invested in Iran than ever before. In Syria, the IRGC's Quds Force assisted Hezbollah with command and control and training. Entering the war was in part "payback" for past favors—but by doing so, Hezbollah tied itself even more tightly to its Iranian master. Finally, Hezbollah also has a military role in Lebanon. Along the Syria-Lebanon border, its forces are patrolling and even laying mines in order to prevent infiltration by fighters belonging to the Islamic State and Jabhat Al Nusra. Hezbollah coordinates quietly with the Lebanese Armed Forces, which dare not confront the Shi'ite group.

If Assad's regime collapses, Hezbollah would lose a key supporter from a country that historically has played a dominant role in Lebanese politics. Even more important, Syria is Iran's

³ Bilal Y. Saab, "Why Lebanon's Najib Mikati Resigned: Hezbollah Makes Its Move," *Foreign Affairs*, March 25, 2013 <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/lebanon/2013-03-25/why-lebanons-najib-mikati-resigned>

⁴ Bilal Y. Saab, "Ominous New Struggle for Hezbollah," *The National Interest*, October 24, 2011 <http://nationalinterest.org/commentary/ominous-new-struggle-hezbollah-6060>

closest ally, and Tehran was calling in its chits by asking Hezbollah and other supporters to close ranks around the Assad regime. Should Syria fall, Hezbollah is likely to lose a transit route and storage facility for weapons from Iran and Syria. In anticipation of any rapid deterioration of security conditions in Syria, Hezbollah has reportedly moved hundreds of missiles from storage sites in Syria to bases in eastern Lebanon. The potential loss of its logistics hub and supply line in Syria would place Hezbollah at a significant disadvantage in the event of another conflict with Israel. In the 2006 conflict with Israel, the group benefited from the strategic transit route through Syria, which allowed Hezbollah to quickly replenish its weapons supplies; therefore, the loss of Syrian support could cause Hezbollah to hold onto its larger, strategic weapons if they cannot be easily acquired and replaced. Unless Hezbollah and Iran can build a similar capability in another location, Hezbollah will likely face challenges resupplying its rockets and missiles in the near term.

But should Assad leave—or even should his jihadist opponents grow stronger—the gravest threat Hezbollah (and Lebanon as a whole) would have to imminently deal with is Sunni extremism. Sunni radicals would not settle for controlling Syria, but would also seek to expand into Lebanon (and possibly Jordan) to fulfill their ideological goals and go after Hezbollah and its Shi'ite supporters. Over the past year, Sunni jihadists have attacked Shi'ite interests in Lebanon on multiple occasions (the bombing of the Iranian embassy on November 19, 2013, was the most spectacular, killing twenty-three people and injuring dozens more). Hezbollah, with the help of the Lebanese army, has shown resiliency and has currently managed to contain the threat by battling with Sunni militants across the Syrian-Lebanese borders and in various areas in Lebanon's northern region, and forcing many of them to retreat into Syria. But the fight is anything but over. Hezbollah is not oblivious to the risks and costs of its military intervention in Syria. Its leadership has calculated that, so long as the balance of power tilts in favor of Assad's forces and the Syria-Lebanon border is largely secure, the costs of siding with Syria are tolerable. However, if the situation drastically worsens in Syria, the costs of supporting what could be a falling regime will be much higher for Hezbollah. Therefore, it is possible the group will revisit its policy to defend its core interests—protecting its arms supplies, maintaining its military deterrent posture vis-à-vis Israel, and aiding Iran should it come under attack.

Without the continuous support of Iran and Syria, Hezbollah would not have been able to dominate Lebanese politics, build a state within a state, and become a formidable regional force. But the same ties that have transformed Hezbollah and increased its powers over the years have also brought significant costs to the organization in terms of lives, resources, reputation, and political standing both in Lebanon and the region. Hezbollah's military intervention in Syria is a clear example of how the group's strategic links to Damascus and Tehran, which have served it so well over the years, can also be a great burden.

Opportunities

The existing tensions within Hezbollah's camp are real, though they should not be exaggerated. Shi'a sentiment in Lebanon is still very much pro-Hezbollah and it would take a long time for Shi'ite dissent and dissatisfaction with the group's entry into Syria to shake its grip on the community. After all, Hezbollah has been nurturing these ties since 1982, providing the

Lebanese Shi'a with social goods, a political voice, security, and a sense of empowerment. Nor is there a strong rival movement. Perhaps most important, the slaughter of minorities by the Islamic State and its bloodthirsty anti-Shi'ite rhetoric create a sense that Hezbollah had no choice but to aid Assad—that it was a case of kill or be killed.

With every bomb that goes off in its stronghold—and with every loss of Shi'a life that is not caused by Israel—Hezbollah's control of its support base could wane, but it will not drastically diminish.⁵ Hezbollah's relations with the Shi'ite Amal and the Christian Free Patriotic Movement (FPM) are still robust. It is also possible that other Lebanese Christian political factions could strengthen relations with Hezbollah because they see it as a credible protector against Sunni extremists—if not the only one, given the relative weakness of the Lebanese army. The chances of a broader Hezbollah-Christian rapprochement in Lebanon are not great given the lingering mistrust, at least among the right-wing Christian factions, but they could increase should the Shi'ite party endorse the recent political initiative of Lebanese Forces leader Samir Geagea, which calls for the election of his old rival and FPM chief Michel Aoun as Lebanese president. Lebanon has been without a head of state—a position traditionally reserved for Maronite Christians—for nearly two years because its politicians have failed to resolve a broader political crisis that has paralyzed the country. If it sanctions Geagea's move, Hezbollah will be praised by an increasing number of Lebanese Christians for helping bring political relevance back to—and, in turn, ensure self-preservation of—a long-marginalized and beleaguered Christian community in Lebanon.⁶

Assad's fate notwithstanding, Hezbollah's ties to Iran will likely remain intact, though the relationship will have to adapt to its changing environment. Unlike its pragmatic relationship with Syria, Hezbollah's organic partnership with Iran is based on deep trust and shared values and interests. Hezbollah looks for ideological and strategic guidance from Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, who instructs his regime's intelligence institutions and elite military units to work closely with Hezbollah. Hezbollah has acquired more autonomy from Iran since the 1980s, and may currently be considered more of a partner than a surrogate, but the group still relies on Iranian training, weapons, and funding. While the overall numbers are unknown, the group likely receives anywhere between \$100 million and \$200 million annually from Iran—and this number often goes up in times of need.

The shared interest of these two actors ensures that this relationship will survive in some form, regardless of the outcome of events in Syria. However, how the Iranian regime responds to changing dynamics in Syria will directly affect Hezbollah's future. Iran could instruct Hezbollah to continue the fight in Syria to try to maintain supply routes and create new allies. Hezbollah could also see itself assume a greater regional role in the service of Iranian interests, to compensate for the loss of Syria (Iraq is one obvious place where it might act given Hezbollah's longstanding links to Shi'a groups there and Iran's strong interests in Iraq). But all of this would

⁵ Bilal Y. Saab, "Hezbollah Under Fire: Could the Bombing in Beirut Spell the End of the Shia Group?," *Foreign Affairs*, November 19, 2013 <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/lebanon/2013-11-19/hezbollah-under-fire>

⁶ Bilal Y. Saab, "Back to Lebanon's Future: The Political Revival of the Country's Christians," *Foreign Affairs*, January 26, 2016 <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/lebanon/2016-01-26/back-lebanons-future>

come at the risk of overstretch, which could weaken Hezbollah at home. Not only would Hezbollah have to protect itself against a much more hostile environment in Syria, but it would also need to potentially guard against opportunistic local political actors who could exploit its relative weakness. While Hezbollah offers many benefits to Iran, including loyalty to its revolutionary ideology and projection of Shi'ite power in Arab lands, its biggest value is its military arsenal, which could be used in the event that Israel launches a war against Iran.

Hezbollah made war and war made Hezbollah. In conflict after conflict, the organization has proven its prowess and shown itself a notch above other Middle Eastern militant groups—and even Arab state militaries. From 1985 to 2000, Hezbollah forces battled Israel in the security zone along the Israeli border, inflicting a steady stream of casualties that eventually led Israel to withdraw, marking the first time Arab arms defeated Israeli arms. Hezbollah has also launched rockets at Israel, and as the range of its weapons systems expanded, so did the concern of Israeli leaders. In 2006, Israel and Hezbollah fought for more than a month, with Hezbollah killing more than one hundred and sixty Israelis—heavy losses for the small and casualty-sensitive Jewish state. During the fight, Hezbollah demonstrated its military strength, ambushing Israeli armored forces and maintaining a rocket barrage in the face of Israeli air strikes and ground incursion. Hezbollah's population surged in the aftermath of that war, with its leader, Hassan Nasrallah, briefly becoming the most admired man in the Arab world.

After the 2006 war and until the outbreak of the Syrian conflict, Hezbollah focused militarily on Israel, as both sides feared another war would break out. Iran helped rearm Hezbollah, making it even more formidable than before and replenishing (and improving) its rocket arsenals. Hezbollah training camps have models of Israeli streets and the organization otherwise prepares its forces for taking on Israel. Hezbollah maintains a vast network of tunnels to hide its forces and rocket launchers as well as secure communications, all in preparation for an Israeli strike. Hezbollah has roughly twenty thousand men under arms, of which five thousand are elite fighters. Hezbollah can call on thousands more in a pinch; it has deliberately kept the size of its forces limited to ensure a high level of training and commitment.

Hezbollah began to intervene militarily in Syria in 2012. This was limited at first, but the growing desperation of the Assad regime forced Hezbollah to step up its involvement and justify its role. The Shi'ite group has sustained heavy losses, with perhaps a thousand dead and many more wounded, and veteran commanders counted among the casualties. Roughly five thousand Hezbollah soldiers fight at a time, but the organization regularly rotates its forces to spread the burden evenly. Nevertheless, to keep its numbers up, Hezbollah deploys younger recruits who are obviously less experienced in warfare. Hezbollah has also changed its tactics. In battles in and around the Syrian town of Qusair in 2013, Hezbollah took heavy casualties as its forces directly assaulted dug-in Syrian rebel positions. In subsequent operations in the Qalamoun mountain area, however, Hezbollah forces slowly advanced and even let some rebels escape, in order to minimize further casualties.

Hezbollah's fighting experience in Syria, while costly in terms of lives and resources, has provided numerous military benefits. Hezbollah is now a larger fighting force by at least twenty percent (although fifteen percent of the initial size is now operating in Syria), skilled in both

conventional and urban warfare. The demands of war in Syria has made it more effective in recruiting soldiers from its own constituency and others, and subsequently in training them. Thousands of younger volunteers have undergone training in recent years in camps in southern Lebanon.⁷ The training lasts anywhere between two to three months and focuses on street battle and counterinsurgency tactics.

Policy Implications and Recommendations

Hezbollah is exhausted and perhaps overwhelmed, but it also sees light at the end of the Syrian tunnel. Equally important, it does not seem like its adversaries, domestic and foreign alike, are in a position to take advantage of its present struggles or make its life more difficult. This makes Hezbollah's uncertain transition from domestic hegemon to regional powerhouse less perilous and more achievable.

In Lebanon, pro-Western and anti-Syrian politicians are unlikely to gain from Hezbollah's travails. They are divided within, and have shown themselves unable to sustain mass support. Rather, it is militia leaders and extremists who are likely to grow more powerful. The more than 1.2 million Syrian refugees in Lebanon—a little more than a quarter of the total population—are a wild card. They might become radicalized, and their camps could become a sanctuary for fighters in Syria. It is even possible that, over time, they might become a violent player in Lebanon's politics itself, as the Palestinians did before them. This is a particular concern for Hezbollah, as the majority of the refugees in Lebanon are Sunni Muslims who see Hezbollah as the friend of their enemy.

In Israel, some in the government might see opportunity in launching a devastating attack against Hezbollah at a time when it appears vulnerable and overstretched. The country's military leadership also is keeping a close eye on the threat posed by the group's new albeit modest presence in the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights. But most of Israel's generals have no appetite for another round of fighting with Hezbollah. That is because they realize that the potential costs of such a military adventure and the risk of catastrophic escalation have dramatically increased.

Hezbollah is battle weary and it cannot easily take on a new foe, especially one such as the Israel Defense Forces (IDF). But it is also battle hardened. As previously mentioned, the group has learned new tricks, and it has been warning since the end of the last conflict in August 2006 that should there be another war, it will conduct cross-border operations – a new element to its military strategy.⁸ Hassan Nasrallah's threat to dispatch units into Galilee bolsters his previous carefully phrased warnings of what Israel can expect from Hezbollah in the next war. Those include a vow in February 2010 to rocket Tel Aviv's Ben Gurion airport if Israel bombs Beirut's international airport, in addition to a declaration by Nasrallah three months later that his group can and will attack shipping along Israel's entire coastline if the Israeli navy shells Lebanese

⁷ Bassem Mroue, "Hezbollah recruiting push comes amid deeper role in Syria," *Associated Press*, December 18, 2015 <http://bigstory.ap.org/article/de8588cd81244ed58a7dd12e32ee18e2/hezbollah-recruiting-push-covers-its-deeper-role-syria>

⁸ Nicholas Blanford and Bilal Y. Saab, "Hezbollah on Offense," *The National Interest*, March 8, 2011 <http://nationalinterest.org/commentary/hezbollah-offense-4982>

infrastructure. That the range of Hezbollah's rockets and missiles puts all of Israel in danger makes Nasrallah's threats more credible.

The border with Israel has been quiet since 2006, and the drain of the Syrian conflict makes Hezbollah even more cautious. Israel, for its part, is trying to walk a fine line. On the one hand, it wants to prevent transfers of Syrian and Iranian arms to Hezbollah, particularly for systems like surface-to-air missiles, anti-ship cruise missiles, or even chemical weapons that might significantly increase the threat to Israel. To that end, it has at times attacked Hezbollah forces transferring weapons, leading Hezbollah to conduct limited attacks on the Golan Heights in response, using Syrian territory as a base. On the other hand, Israel is in no mood for a broader clash that could involve Iran. Too many strikes on Hezbollah, or forcing Hezbollah into a position where its political standing depends on a fight with Israel, would be a self-defeating action for Israel, bringing on the war it hopes to deter.

Nevertheless, conflict might still break out: few predicted the 2006 war, for example. Given that Israel regularly hits Hezbollah weapons shipments, the chances of escalation remain considerable. Israel might miscalculate about whether a particular strike would result in escalation, while Hezbollah might think a limited response would not lead Israel to up the ante. Much would depend on the domestic political position of both the Israeli government and of Hezbollah, and neither one has shown much aptitude for understanding the other's politics. In addition, Hezbollah has positioned its forces to help Iran deter Israel. Should Iran become embroiled in a conflict involving Israel, Hezbollah is prepared to act. Of all the unknowns regarding the next war, the one certainty is that it will be of such magnitude and lethality that it will make the month-long confrontation of 2006 look like a Sunday afternoon stroll in the park.

There is no end in sight to the conflict in Syria, and the growing sectarianism and risk of violence in Lebanon will put Syrian jihadists—not America or Israel—at the center of Hezbollah's radar, regardless of its rhetoric. The military drain of keeping thousands of fighters in supply and well-trained will crowd out other organizational priorities, and Hezbollah will be perceived as even more of a sectarian actor in Lebanon. Hezbollah will have to rely more on rockets and para-military activities as an asymmetric response.

Hezbollah does maintain its capacity for acting internationally. In recent years, Hezbollah used terrorist tactics to respond to what it sees as Israeli aggression against itself or against Iran. For example, Hezbollah is suspected to have struck Israel and Jewish facilities in Argentina in the 1990s, in response to what it considered Israeli escalation in the border war in Lebanon. Hezbollah also is believed to have attempted several international terrorist attacks against Israeli targets in Europe and Asia after Israel allegedly killed Imad Mughniyeh in 2008, the Shi'ite party's most senior military commander and head of external operations.

Despite Hezbollah's role in terrorism and anti-American rhetoric, the organization, by default, shares several interests with the United States—though both sides would be loath to admit it. Both actors are at war with the Islamic State and other Sunni extremists, and both want to prop up Iraqi Prime Minister Haidar Abadi's government in Baghdad. Even within Lebanon, while Washington supports Hezbollah's political rivals in the anti-Syrian March 14 coalition, it

recognizes that Hezbollah is helping hold the country together, and that either an Islamic State expansion or a descent into chaos would be worse than the status quo. Open cooperation, however, is politically out of the question and not desirable for both parties. Indeed, a slight shift could turn suspicion into conflict.

The US-led coalition in Syria is focused on Sunni extremists, and thus is indirectly helping the Assad regime, Hezbollah's ally. Yet, if Washington decides to live up to its anti-Assad rhetoric and take on the Syrian regime as well as Sunni jihadists, it will also be taking on Hezbollah. Hezbollah's hostility to Israel remains strong, another point of friction. In addition, Hezbollah is more in bed with Iran now than ever before, and any military action against Tehran must seriously factor in Hezbollah's response.

Any serious assessment of Hezbollah's terrorist threat to the US homeland, and whether it might increase or decrease following the lifting of international sanctions against Iran, must look at both the intentions and capabilities of the group. Nobody in the US Government doubts the group's terrorist capabilities. Indeed, there is a healthy appreciation within the US intelligence community for what Hezbollah is capable of. But it is on the issue of intentions where there might be some debate, although the overwhelming majority of analysts and officials I have known and briefed on Hezbollah throughout my career concur that the group has no interest in striking on US soil.

While Hezbollah did hit US interests in the region, it has never launched an attack on US territory. Two main factors explain this record: First, Hezbollah's international activities are strictly controlled by Iranian paramilitary and intelligence agencies. Indeed, Hezbollah's so-called external operations wing is an extension of the Iranian Quds Force. So, Hezbollah neither strategizes nor acts alone when it comes to global operations. It does so under the strategic guidance and close supervision of Iran. In short, the "Hezbollah international terrorism problem" is, essentially, an "Iran international terrorism problem." In other words, with Hezbollah, unlike terror caused by the Islamic State and Al Qaeda, there is a clear return address, and it is Tehran. Second, Hezbollah has no interest in perpetuating terrorism directly against the United States, and is fully aware of both its limitations and the steep price it would pay for attacking the United States. This is a fight it has no desire in picking.

Could the group's calculus with regard to the United States change in the foreseeable future? A lot would depend on the evolution of relations between the United States and Iran. While there is some alignment of interests in the Middle East between the two countries, and inter-governmental communication seems to be improving following the conclusion of the nuclear deal, ties are still tense and unpredictable due to high mistrust and many other conflicting interests in the region. Should relations take a dramatic turn for the worse over escalation following, for example, a grave incident at sea in the Arab Gulf; an inadvertent clash on the ground in Iraq or elsewhere; or a violation by Tehran of the nuclear deal – Iran, due to its massive conventional inferiority relative to the United States, might employ asymmetric tools and particularly terrorism to defend itself in the event of confrontation. Hezbollah could very well be one of those tools. But even under this scenario, Hezbollah would still weigh its options and think twice before deciding to take on the most powerful nation on earth.

Hezbollah is officially designated by the US Government as a terrorist organization. Therefore, there are clear constraints regarding what Washington can do with the party. In essence, the United States does not have a policy toward the group beyond refusing to directly talk to or deal with it. As I wrote almost six years ago,⁹ the most effective strategic option the United States can and should pursue with regard to Hezbollah is containment. At the end of the day, the party is a product of Lebanon's internal weakness; Iran's intervention in Lebanese domestic politics; and the ongoing conflict with Israel. The United States has neither the desire nor the capacity to solve all these complex problems on its own. The best thing it can do is continue to help build state capacity in Lebanon and bolster the country's internal strength by providing military assistance to the Lebanese Armed Forces. This process of state-building, should it produce tangible and lasting results, would ultimately weaken Hezbollah's rationale for keeping its arms.

⁹ Bilal Y. Saab, *Levantine Reset: Toward A More Viable U.S. Strategy For Lebanon*, Analysis Paper, Number 21 (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, July 2010)
http://www.brookings.edu/~media/research/files/papers/2010/7/lebanon-saab/07_lebanon_saab.pdf