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Power Points Defining the Syria-Hezbollah Relationship

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Paper

Summary

Hezbollah's relationship with Syria has long been characterized by periods of mutual distrust and conflicting goals. Both sides pursue their own political priorities with little regard for the other's interests. Hezbollah and its patron, Iran, intervened in Syria to save President Bashar al-Assad's regime, but they built a power base in Syria independent from state institutions. Russia's military intervention gave the Assad regime an opportunity to reverse its marginalization. Now, as the war comes to a close, Syria hopes to rebalance its relationship with Hezbollah and Iran by exploiting Russia's presence.

Key Periods in the Syria-Hezbollah Relationship

- In the 1980s, Syria-Hezbollah relations were characterized by both cooperation and tension. Syria's ties with Iran and role in Lebanon's civil war allowed Hezbollah's rise to power. But Hezbollah's expanding influence came at the expense of Syria's local Shia ally.

- After the Lebanese civil war ended in 1990, Hezbollah acquiesced to Syrian control. Syria's participation in negotiations with Israel caused simmering tensions between the allies. Yet Syria also used Hezbollah as leverage in those talks.

- Following Syria's withdrawal from Lebanon in 2005, Hezbollah defended its relationship with Damascus as a crucial part of the resistance against Israel, the raison d'être for its arsenal.

- Hezbollah's 2012–2013 intervention in the Syrian war gave them the upper hand in their relationship with Damascus, which they sought to exploit by pursuing political aims in Syria, such as opening a front against Israel in the Golan Heights.

- Since 2015, the Assad regime has used Russia's military support to rebalance its relationship with Hezbollah and reverse the party's encroachment on Syrian society.

Key Themes

- Syria's relationship with Hezbollah has long been characterized by a pragmatic recognition of shifting power dynamics and the parallel pursuit of divergent political interests. Both sides understand that a weakened partner could lead to their own loss of power, which has consistently justified intervention to support the other.

- Syria and Russia appear opposed to attempts to open a new front against Israel in the Golan Heights, which could undermine Syrian sovereignty and threaten the Assad regime's fragile victory.

- The Syrian government enjoys the regional influence afforded by its close relationship with Hezbollah. In the aftermath of the Syrian war, the Assad regime will seek to rebalance relations with Hezbollah and regain its previous advantage.

Introduction

Political Islam
As the conflict in Syria winds down, attention is on the political actors who ensured that Syrian President Bashar al-Assad would remain in power. Iran and the pro-Iranian Lebanese Hezbollah have played a decisive role to this end, leading to speculation that the Syrian regime is unlikely to ever challenge Tehran's political agenda. However, if the past is any indicator, that conclusion is far from certain. For while Syria may be unlikely to break with Iran and its allies, their relationship is more complex than it appears. Characterized at various points by mutual distrust and conflicting aims, both sides have been guided by an acute sense of power dynamics. Their actions have been defined by their political interests—even when these interests did not overlap.

The heart of Syrian-Iranian relations is the relationship between Syria and Hezbollah. In just under four decades, the Syria-Hezbollah rapport has best embodied the dynamic between Damascus and Tehran. Tensions have arisen when either Syria or Hezbollah has perceived the other as infringing on its power. In the 1980s, during Lebanon's civil war, they entered into conflict when Hezbollah challenged Syria's allies and goals. Once the war ended in 1990, Hezbollah accepted Syrian supremacy. It pragmatically balanced Syrian and Iranian interests, despite turbulence in its relationship with Damascus when either side perceived the other as crossing redlines. Hezbollah and Iran worried that successful Syrian negotiations with Israel would threaten their interests in Lebanon, while Damascus was unwilling to recognize these concerns, even as it used Hezbollah's military capabilities as leverage against Israel.

The regime of President Bashar al-Assad welcomed Hezbollah's intervention in Syria in 2012, but not with alacrity. Iran and Hezbollah built a power base in Syria independent from state institutions, particularly among the country's Shia minority and limited segments of the Sunni and Alawite communities, which the Assad regime perceived as an infringement on its power and sovereignty. It understood that Iran and Hezbollah sought to preserve their own interests in Syria and Lebanon by protecting the regime. However, the situation in Syria shifted. Russia's intervention in 2015 injected a new variable into the Syrian regime's dealings with Hezbollah and Iran—one that gave the regime an opportunity to reassert itself. The likely outcome will be a return to the ties that existed before the war, rather than a fundamental transformation of the Syria-Hezbollah relationship.

Hezbollah and Syria From 1982 to 2011

During the three decades prior to Hezbollah's deployment in Syria, the party's relationship with Syria mirrored the ups and downs of the alliance between Tehran and Damascus. During the 1980s, the Hezbollah-Syria relationship developed as Iran attempted to export its Islamic revolution.[1] At different times, Hezbollah's and Syria's agendas contradicted one another, leading to short periods of violence. By the end of the Lebanese civil war in 1990, however, things had changed. Hezbollah

accepted Syria's dominant role in Lebanon and focused its attention, in line with Damascus's preferences, on fighting Israel's military occupation of southern Lebanon. By 2005, when Syrian forces withdrew from Lebanon, Hezbollah was protecting Syria's stake in the country, while greatly enhancing its own power in the process.

The Turbulent 1980s

The 1980s were symptomatic of the transactionalism that had long characterized relations between Syria and Iran. The two countries established diplomatic relations in 1947, though Iran's monarch at the time, shah Mohammed Reza Pahlavi, a U.S. ally, was often at odds with the successive pro-Soviet Arab nationalist governments in Damascus.[2] However, Syrian-Iranian relations improved following the rise to power of Syrian president Hafez al-Assad in 1970. Syria's rivalry with Iraq and its need to adapt to then Egyptian president Anwar Sadat's rapprochement with first the United States then Israel, after the 1973 Arab-Israeli war, pushed the regime to improve its ties with Iran.[3] The exchanges culminated in Assad's visit to Tehran in December 1975. However, because the two governments differed over Egypt's negotiations with Israel, their increased contact had little impact on regional alliances. It did, however, allow Assad to counterbalance Syria's main Arab rival: Iraq.[4] Led by competing Baathist regimes, Syria and Iraq were vying for primacy as the champion of broader Arab causes.[5] For example, Assad wanted the shah of Iran to persuade Washington to adopt a more balanced approach to the Arab-Israeli conflict.[6]

At the same time, in his typically hard-nosed fashion, Assad supported the shah's Islamic opposition.[7] He granted Syrian passports to its leading members while asking allies in Lebanon to provide them with military training. By the late 1970s, Syria had forged strong relations with opposition figures through the rising Lebanese-Iranian Shia leader Imam Musa al-Sadr.[8] In Beirut, Sadr sought regional allies for his newly established Amal Movement—his close ties with the Assad regime provided him with just that.

The Islamic Revolution transformed Tehran's connection with Damascus. Syria, building on its preexisting ties with Iran's opposition, was the first Arab state to congratulate the postrevolution leadership. While many other Arab states feared that Iran might export its revolution to Arab Shia populations, the Assad regime did not share their concerns. Assad, from Syria's minority Alawite community, was more fearful of the Sunni Muslim Brotherhood. When the Brotherhood launched a campaign of attacks against the Assad regime in 1981 and 1982, Iran, in turn, abandoned it.[9]

These Syrian-Iranian ties paved the way for Hezbollah's rise in Lebanon, where thousands of Syrian troops had deployed in 1976 to help quell the civil war. In 1982, shortly after Israel invaded the country in June to expel Palestinian factions, the Assad regime allowed hundreds of Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) members to enter Lebanon's Beqaa Valley from Syria and establish a training camp for groups of young men that would later unify to form Hezbollah.[10] The party's current deputy secretary general, Naim Qassem, later described Iranian efforts as "an advanced system of training, religious practice and personal as well as moral cultivation."[11]

Israel's invasion momentarily curbed Syrian influence in Lebanon, reinforcing cooperation between the Assad regime and Iran. Multinational Western forces stationed in Lebanon following the invasion tried to secure a Syrian withdrawal, while the Israeli army operated mainly south of Beirut and in southern Lebanon. Early cells of Hezbollah militants began attacking Western and Israeli forces, which allowed the fledging party to expand its power and reach. Only later, however, would Hezbollah transform into a more cohesive organization, when the party released an open letter in 1985 that outlined its political program and signaled a new era in revolutionary Shia politics.[12]

In the second half of the 1980s, Hezbollah's actions both advanced Syrian objectives in Lebanon and challenged them, leading to the first signs of tension between the two sides. The party began abducting Western nationals in Beirut,[13] which mirrored Iran's revolutionary politics at the time. Syria

benefited from being perceived as a potential stabilizing force for Lebanon, in contrast to Hezbollah, but there were downsides to the party's aggressive approach. As the Syrian regime tried to reassert its domination over the country, it had to carefully prevent Iran from driving the agenda. And as Hezbollah sought to drive the resistance against Israel, Damascus was concerned that it might lose its sway over Lebanon's Shia population. The Syrians were, therefore, wary of supporting a Tehran-backed group as the de facto representative of the Shia community when its own primary Shia ally was the Amal Movement.

This growing rivalry led to escalating tensions and armed clashes between the Amal Movement and Hezbollah. The Syrian army occasionally intervened against Hezbollah on behalf of its ally. Aqel Hamiyeh, an Amal official who played a leading role in the conflict with Hezbollah, later described the mood at the time:

We tried talking to the Iranians, saying that we didn't want tensions. Hezbollah became more stubborn in Baalbek and the villages around Baalbek. The Iranians told us that we could resist together, but on the ground, things were going differently. The Iranians had their own agenda. The Iranians were working for something new.[14]

In May 1986, fighting between the two sides left three Hezbollah members and two Syrian soldiers dead.[15] When Hezbollah kidnapped two Syrian officers, the Syrian army reacted by detaining several party members.[16] In February 1987, Syrian troops massacred Hezbollah members at the party's headquarters, the Fathallah Barracks in West Beirut.[17] The victims had not been previously involved in interparty fighting, leading many to speculate that they were executed as a warning to Hezbollah. Sheikh Subhi Tufeili, then Hezbollah's secretary general, accused Syria of "conspiring with Israel,"[18] but the party refrained from retaliating. Many years later, Qassem, Hezbollah's current deputy secretary general, would write, pointedly, "Sorrow over the event persists."[19]

Following the Fathallah massacre, conflict between the Amal Movement and Hezbollah spread. Fighting stretched on into 1988, until the Syrians deployed their forces in Beirut's Shia-majority southern suburbs to separate the warring parties. Qassem later wrote that Hezbollah leaders had requested a meeting with Hafez al-Assad to discuss the deployment. The meeting involved an "ideological and political discussion" that had a strong impact on the Syrian president's stance toward Hezbollah.[20] The Amal-Hezbollah conflict would continue, however, until Syria and Iran came to an agreement in November 1990 that ended the fighting.[21]

Major global change also impacted the situation in Lebanon. By the late 1980s, the collapse of the Soviet Union seemed imminent. To compensate for the loss of its major international backer, Damascus was compelled to engage in a rapprochement with the United States. This culminated in Syria's taking part in the international coalition to liberate Kuwait, creating an opening for the Assad regime to end the conflict in Lebanon by imposing its military control over the whole country in October 1990. In light of its rapprochement with the United States, Syria also worked to free Western hostages still being held by Hezbollah.

This rapprochement hardly aligned with Iranian interests, given the hostility between Tehran and many Western countries, particularly the United States. Yet the balance of power in Lebanon had tilted strongly in Syria's favor, forcing Hezbollah to adapt. The party chose to focus on combating Israel's occupation of southern Lebanon in coordination with Damascus, which allowed Hezbollah to remain part of the armed resistance. The party's anti-Israeli operations provided Syria with leverage over Israel as the two countries began direct negotiations in the months after the October 1990 Madrid conference on Arab-Israeli peace.

Cooperation Amid Competing Agendas in the 1990s

While the immediate postwar period in Lebanon saw Hezbollah's relationship with Syria strengthen,

it again shed light on the ambiguous nature of their relations. Syria's peace talks with Israel initially exacerbated their divergent objectives. Hafez al-Assad claimed to be pursuing a "peace of the brave," while Hezbollah and Iran understood that such an outcome might threaten their interests in Lebanon and, indeed, Hezbollah's very existence. Yet Syria's dominant role ensured that Hezbollah kept its concerns in check to avoid another confrontation with Damascus.

This restraint was on display in September 1993, when hundreds of pro-Hezbollah demonstrators protested in Beirut against the Oslo Accords signed between the Palestine Liberation Organization and Israel.[22] The Lebanese army, then effectively under Syrian control, shot at the unarmed demonstrators, killing nine people. While this provoked new protests, the situation was contained. The incident, which could not have taken place without implicit Syrian approval, heightened tensions between Syria, Hezbollah, and Iran. At the time, it was interpreted as a signal that criticism of Syria's participation in talks with Israel would not be tolerated, even as Assad, a master of dual messaging, sought to make it clear that he could restrain Hezbollah after any peace deal.

This message apparently reached Washington. It was well summarized by then national security adviser Anthony Lake in a lecture he gave in May 1994. Lake commented on how Assad's approach to peace talks with Israel had worried Hezbollah and Iran. He observed that when the Syrian president stated that he regarded peace as a strategic choice,

his nation's erstwhile extremist allies quickly grew very nervous. . . . Hezbollah leaders argued how best to pursue an extremist agenda in an era of Israeli-Lebanese peace. Iranian officials hurriedly visited Damascus but apparently left empty-handed, and when they got home, the Iranian clergy began criticizing the leadership for failing to prevent the emerging isolation of their nation.[23]

Ultimately, the failure of Syrian-Israeli negotiations and Israel's unilateral withdrawal from Lebanon in May 2000 ensured that Syria did not part ways with Hezbollah and Iran over the peace negotiations. When Hafez al-Assad died in early June 2000, Bashar al-Assad, his son and successor, grew closer to Hezbollah. Syria had to find other means of justifying military action against Israel after Israeli forces withdrew from Lebanon, which they did by claiming that parts of Lebanese territory were still occupied. This served Hezbollah well, as it rationalized the party's continued armed resistance. From then on, Syria and Hezbollah regarded their strategic interests as much more closely aligned.

Syria Withdraws and Hezbollah Takes Over

Shifting regional dynamics following the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq in 2003 changed Syria's relationship with Hezbollah once again. In February 2005, former Lebanese prime minister Rafik Hariri was assassinated in Beirut. It was widely believed that the Syrian regime was involved. Following a United Nations investigation of the crime, Hezbollah party members were accused as well. Hariri and his allies intended to stand against pro-Syrian candidates in the next parliamentary elections and believed they were guaranteed to win a majority,[24] which would have undermined the Syrian-imposed order in Lebanon and weakened both Syria and Hezbollah. Anti-Syrian demonstrations in Beirut, coupled with outside pressure, compelled Assad to withdraw his forces from Lebanon in April, making Hezbollah the primary decisionmaker on the ground for the Syria-Hezbollah-Iran alliance.

With the change in power dynamics, the alliance's priorities, now set by Hezbollah, shifted as well. Hezbollah's main concern was not to return the Syrian military to Lebanon but to safeguard its own weapons, guarantee a leading role for itself in national politics, and protect Iranian and Syrian interests against the United States and its allies.[25] As a result, the party refined its approach toward Syria. Instead of emphasizing the common history of Syria and Lebanon, Hezbollah defended its relationship with Damascus by portraying it as an "ally of the resistance." The shared pursuit of resistance, in turn, allowed Hezbollah to remain armed.

In the aftermath of the Syrian withdrawal, Hezbollah also played a leading role in politically neutralizing Syria's Lebanese opponents while rallying Syria's Lebanese allies. The party thus ushered in a new era in its relationship with the Syrian regime, in which it was no longer the junior partner. The withdrawal spelled the end of Syria's absolute control over Lebanon. In its place, Hezbollah sought to fill the vacuum, thanks to the political leverage it enjoyed due to its military capabilities and ability to mobilize the Shia community.

In 2005, Hezbollah joined the Lebanese government for the first time.[26] In collaboration with the Amal Movement—which had become its principal ally against the new March 14 Alliance coalition—Hezbollah named two cabinet ministers, one of them a party member. Naim Qassem has explained why Hezbollah concluded that its participation in governance was necessary, arguing that the new cabinet would have real authority, unlike previous ones under Syrian control. It "would exercise an active role in determining the direction of the country, rather than merely acting in an executive capacity as it has done in the past," he wrote.[27] In other words, Hezbollah was dead set on helping to define Lebanon's course for the future.

While preserving its alliance with the Syrian regime, Hezbollah was now autonomous in its decisionmaking. Indeed, there were times when it was Syria that followed the party's lead. This was evident in summer 2006, when Hezbollah and Israel engaged in a thirty-four-day war. During that conflict, the Syrian regime tapped into its own arsenal to supply Hezbollah with weapons for the first time, including 220-millimeter and 302-millimeter rockets.[28] This came as a surprise to Israel.[29] Syria hoped to guarantee that Hezbollah was not impaired by the conflict, reaffirming a constant in the Syria-Hezbollah relationship: the preservation of one side's power often means ensuring that their partner is not weakened.

Between 2006 and 2011, Hezbollah's sway expanded. At the same time, Syria normalized relations with European countries, notably France under then president Nicolas Sarkozy, ending the isolation it faced after the Hariri assassination. In 2009, a Saudi-sponsored reconciliation took place between the Assad regime and Lebanese politicians who had opposed Damascus,[30] followed months later by Assad's visit to Beirut in July 2010. However, that momentary harmony collapsed in early 2011 when Hezbollah and Syria brought down a national unity government in Beirut led by Rafik Hariri's son, Saad Hariri. The outbreak of the Syrian uprising in March 2011 again altered the relationship between the Syrian regime and Hezbollah.

Hezbollah's Intervention in the Syrian Conflict

After the Syrian uprising began, the Assad regime came to depend on Hezbollah and Iran for its survival, shifting the balance of relations even more to their advantage. The regime's violent response to protests in March 2011 isolated it regionally and internationally. As it began losing large swaths of territory in 2012, its allies decided to intervene militarily, with Hezbollah reportedly playing a large part in Iran's decision to support Assad.[31] However, Hezbollah's role was focused less on rebuilding and reinforcing the capacities of regime forces than on helping to establish parallel institutions, such as pro-regime militias. This replicated what Hezbollah had done in Lebanon—building up an independent armed force in the midst of a weak state. The alliance between Hezbollah and Syria had reached a new phase in which the party not only dictated the terms of the relationship but also had room to expand its ideological, military, and political influence inside Syria.

Initially, Hezbollah framed its Syrian intervention as motivated by the protection of Lebanese-Syrian dual nationals living on the Syrian side of the border.[32] Only later would it affirm the party's obligation to defend a so-called ally of the resistance. On October 11, 2012, following the death of a Hezbollah member in Syria, the party's secretary general, Hassan Nasrallah, acknowledged Hezbollah's participation in an "accidental" and limited engagement in which it had helped Syrian government forces defend twenty-three villages around the town of Qusayr, near the Lebanese border.[33] Though the villages were inside Syrian territory, Nasrallah said, they were inhabited by some 30,000

Lebanese citizens from all sects.

By 2013, Nasrallah was laying out a new rationale that underscored the stark contrast between Iran's and Hezbollah's ambitions in Syria and those of the Assad regime.[34] In a speech on May 9, Hezbollah's secretary general observed that. in the past, Syria had been criticized for not militarily opposing Israel's occupation of the Golan Heights, unlike their intervention in Lebanon. The conflict in Lebanon was possible due to the weak Lebanese state, he continued, unlike in Syria, where a strong government was in place. But the Syrian conflict had changed the situation, creating "an opportunity" to begin popular resistance in the Golan. In other words, Nasrallah highlighted the potential advantages of a weak Syrian state, underlining how it would allow Iran and Hezbollah to pursue their goal of resistance against Israel. Their willingness to take advantage of Syria's impotence was a bitter pill for the Assad regime.

Hezbollah's rising casualties in the Syrian conflict, estimated by the number of funerals held for party members, became increasingly difficult to explain away as the consequence of limited engagements. On May 19, 2013, Hezbollah and Syrian forces launched a major offensive to retake Qusayr. Hezbollah suffered heavy casualties during the operation, which last nearly twenty days.[35] Changing tack, on May 25, 2013, Nasrallah laid out a detailed argument for the party's strategic involvement in the Syrian war, signaling a long-term presence. The situation in Syria was no longer about "a people participating in a revolution against a regime, or a question of reforms," Nasrallah said.[36] Rather, the proliferation of armed groups in Syria posed a danger to Lebanon, and Hezbollah had intervened to protect its interests.[37] He spoke of an existential threat not only to Hezbollah and Lebanon's Shia population but to the whole country, including Sunnis. "I have evidence," he added.[38] If Hezbollah allowed Syria's regime to collapse, the resistance would be besieged.

Syria is the back of the resistance and its foundation, and the resistance cannot stand by watching, leaving its back exposed or its foundation broken, otherwise we would be idiots. The idiot is the one who watches the conspiracy crawling toward him, but doesn't move. If Syria falls into American and takfiri hands, the resistance will be surrounded and Israel will enter Lebanon to impose its conditions and again carry Lebanon into an Israeli era.[39]

As Hezbollah's military involvement widened dramatically—extending to the northern part of Syria, especially Aleppo and its vast countryside—it became inevitable that the party would help set up foreign militias and irregular Syrian forces to bolster its own forces.

Iran's and Hezbollah's mobilization of militias took two forms. They recruited foreign combatants from places such as Iraq, Afghanistan, and Pakistan, while at the same time mobilizing Syria's Shia community.[40] These efforts came with a high price tag for Iran. Staffan de Mistura, then the United Nations' special envoy to Syria, estimated in 2015 that Tehran had spent some $6 billion annually in financial and military assistance to prop up the Assad regime.[41] Iran also had to pay the thousands of foreign fighters that it brought to Syria.[42]

For Iran and Hezbollah, the fighting in Syria presented an opportunity to not only establish a foothold in Syria through local Shia militias, but also to facilitate future Iranian intervention across the Middle East by training non-Syrian pro-Iran militias. Mohammed Ali Falaki, then an IRGC general, signaled Iran's ulterior motive when he told an Iranian news agency that Tehran had established "a liberation army with fronts in Syria, Yemen, and Iraq."[43] Hezbollah was at the heart of this effort: with its indoctrination, discipline, and experience, the party took the lead in major battles.

According to Syria's allies in Beirut, this challenge to the authority of the Syrian state disquieted the Assad regime, which was not used to allowing armed groups outside its control.[44] The regime's reaction took different forms, such as restricting the militias' freedom of movement within the Damascus area or limiting public Shia ceremonies.[45] This recalled earlier tensions in Damascus's relationship with Iran and Hezbollah, when Syria perceived things as infringing on the regime's power and established redlines. The regime's main concern was Iran's and Hezbollah's mobilization

of Syria's Shia population, rather than the foreign militias.[46] Iran's and Hezbollah's attempts to create an institutional framework—including the establishment of a religious network, indoctrinated militias, and supportive communities, all outside the state's control and influence—were intended to supplant Syrian society itself, laying the foundation for future mobilization efforts.

These mobilization efforts extended to religion itself. In 2012, the Supreme Islamic Jaafari Council, the first independent Shia representative body in Syria, was established.[47] The council was reminiscent of Lebanon's Supreme Islamic Shia Council, which Musa al-Sadr established in 1967 to represent the country's Shia population and lay the groundwork for greater political participation. While the Syrian state established the council by decree, the institution effectively acted as an extension of Iran and Hezbollah, catering to Hezbollah's Syrian followers. The council's clerics organized the funerals of Shia fighters who had been killed in combat and participated in commemorations of the Islamic revolution in Iran.[48]

By the end of 2013, armed Syrian Shia groups had become more visible. Images of Hassan Nasrallah and Hezbollah flags were often present in these groups' videos and posters. Quwwat al-Rida, the most prominent militia in Homs Governorate, became a clear manifestation of tensions between Hezbollah and the Syrian regime. The militia, which recruited from the city of Homs and villages surrounding it, helped break the siege of two Shia towns in Aleppo Governorate, Nubol and Zahraa.[49] The Syrian regime, meanwhile, attempted to limit Hezbollah's influence by imposing Syrian state authority over Quwwat al-Rida.

As the Assad regime regained its confidence and influence by 2017, two years after Russia's military intervention, it began reasserting control over Syrian militias, including Syrian Shia militias. According to a Hezbollah official, Syrian officers and officials expressed concern over the party's infiltration of Syria's social fabric.[50] The presence of sectarian Shia militias defied the official secular character of the Syrian state. Moreover, Syrian Shia militias often criticized the state security services on social media platforms, calling them incompetent—a striking transgression in what had been a tightly controlled system.[51] Consequently, the Syrian government decided to integrate Quwwat al-Rida into its armed forces. By starting to pay the salaries of militia members, the regime increased its leverage over them and undermined the influence of Hezbollah.

An internal investigation by a Quwwat al-Rida committee, leaked in April 2017 to a Lebanese website, revealed the obstacles Iran faced trying to transform Syria into a testing ground for its regional agenda.[52] The document highlighted disagreements between Quwwat al-Rida's Syrian members and their Lebanese leadership. It pointed to grievances on both sides, including the Syrians' anger over being paid less than the Lebanese combatants and Hezbollah's dissatisfaction with their belief that Shia mobilization had fallen short of expectations. Hezbollah was also displeased that their Syrian recruits were not as responsive to indoctrination as Lebanese fighters were.

The Syrian Shia community was not cohesive and unified, which prevented the formation of a broad Shia organization throughout Syria. Shia represent only a small minority of the Syrian population, 1– 2 percent, and are dispersed across Syria, which limited the threat they posed to the regime. The Syrian regime eventually managed to impose its control over the Shia groups, which now routinely include photographs of Hafez and Bashar al-Assad in their propaganda.

However, something more profound was at play after 2015. Russia intervened in September 2015 in defense of the regime and the Syrian state. Moscow's focus on rebuilding state capacity clashed with Iran's efforts to create institutions that could circumvent the state. By bolstering the regime and enabling it to regain territory, the Russians allowed Syria's leadership to slowly revive its moribund authority.[53] After years of dependency, the Syrians could finally rebalance their power relations with Iran and its allies. Thanks to Russia, the Assad regime had room to ensure that Iran would not profit off Syria's vulnerabilities.

These volatile dynamics played out most noticeably in southwestern Syria, near the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights. Taking advantage of Syria's weakness, Iran and Hezbollah started to build infrastructure in the region to support a sustained confrontation with Israel. This challenged the Syrian regime's long-standing implicit understanding with Israel to keep the Golan front quiet in accordance with the 1974 armistice agreement. Israel soon declared that it would not permit Iran and Hezbollah to build up a military capacity in Syria and began attacking their positions. Russia did not deploy its anti-aircraft defenses, which many interpreted as a sign that Moscow opposed Iran's and Hezbollah's expanding presence near the Golan, in part because the Kremlin feared that any ensuing conflict might undermine its efforts to stabilize Assad's rule.[54]

Signs on the ground have pointed to friction between Russia and Hezbollah. The deployment of Russian military police on the Lebanese-Syrian border and on the Syrian side of the Golan Heights armistice line has, at times, exacerbated tensions with Hezbollah. A rare standoff on the outskirts of Qusayr between Hezbollah and Russian forces in June 2018 was resolved when the Russians withdrew and were reportedly replaced by Syrian forces.[55] A month before the incident, Moscow had called for all foreign forces to leave Syria—which appeared to implicitly include Iran and Hezbollah.[56]

Nor was Damascus completely neutral in these exchanges between Russia and Iran. When Ali Akbar Velayati, the Iranian supreme leader's adviser on foreign affairs, stated that Iran's intervention in Syria had prevented the collapse of the Assad regime, he was taken to task in the semi-official *Al-Watan* newspaper, owned by Bashar al-Assad's cousin.[57] The reverberations of these disputes even reached Tehran. Behrouz Bonyadi, an Iranian member of parliament, warned that Assad's alliance with Russian President Vladimir Putin could "sacrifice" Iran to the United States and Israel. "Bashar Assad, with full impudence, has cozied up to Putin," Bonyadi said, adding, "Russia will not be a trustworthy friend for us."[58]

While Russia and Iran have conflicting priorities in Syria, they are not likely to fundamentally change Damascus's relations with Tehran or Hezbollah. The Assad regime will continue to use Russia's presence to revive its authority through state institutions, particularly military and security bodies, and rebalance its relationship with Iran. The Assad regime and Hezbollah, within the framework of the Syrian-Iranian relationship, have long demonstrated an ability to reconcile their priorities amid the changing power dynamics of the alliance. This tendency toward stability has helped both sides overcome tensions in their relations.

As Russia continues to assert its influence in Syria's state institutions, and the country as a whole, Hezbollah's role and presence in Syria may decline. But Assad—and, to an extent, even Russia— has no desire to break with Hezbollah. The regime's continued relationship with the party is not only a cornerstone of Damascus's relations with Iran, it is also likely to provide the Assad regime with valuable leverage in any future negotiations with the United States, Sunni-majority Arab states, or Israel. For as long as Syria maintains its connection with Hezbollah, there will be reason to treat the Assad regime as a potential counterweight to Hezbollah and its Iranian patrons.

For the Syrian regime, returning to its prewar relationship with Iran and Hezbollah will mean separating the Golan Heights from regional proxy conflicts and preventing a new front with Israel from opening on Syrian territory. While it's not clear how Iran and Hezbollah will respond to this, both must have understood that enabling Assad to regain power meant the regime would return to its past behavior. The regimes of both Hafez and Bashar al-Assad have consistently sought to preserve their independence to act flexibly and pursue political outcomes that are not always necessarily in line with allies' interests.

Assad, with Russian support, will also aim to continue extending the state's authority over Syrian militias, disbanding them or perhaps conscripting their members into the regular armed forces. The regime may seek a rapprochement with the Gulf states—Iran's main regional rivals—to try to anchor its own power by using Arab unity to control (though not eliminate) Iranian influence. This would

potentially allow Damascus to again play Arab states and Iran against each other, to its own benefit. However, the extent of Syria's success will ultimately depend on its ability to strengthen what is currently a weak state—the regime today has little capacity to prevent regional powers from pursuing proxy conflicts within its borders.

Conclusion

For decades, the relationship between the Syrian regime and Hezbollah has been defined by resilience amid shifting power dynamics, and this will not change in the foreseeable future. The inherent stability of their relationship derives from the fact that, although the two unambiguously understand the other's ambitions, both sides are able to recognize when the other gains the upper hand. Hezbollah adapted to Syrian dominance in Lebanon after 1990, just as the Assad regime had little choice but to consent when Iran and Hezbollah established Syrian Shia militias independent of the regime after 2012 or attempted to transform the Golan Heights into a new front against Israel.

Russia's military intervention in 2015 introduced a new variable into the equation. Moscow's emphasis on rebuilding state capacity and ability to help the regime retake large parts of Syrian territory began reversing the Assad regime's marginalization at home. The Syrian state began reasserting its control over pro-regime militias, including the Shia militias close to Hezbollah and Iran. Meanwhile, Tehran's ambitions in the Golan Heights ran into Israeli efforts to prevent Iran from establishing a military infrastructure in Syria. That Russia did nothing to thwart Israeli air attacks against Iranian and Hezbollah positions only underlined that Moscow, too, was not willing to see Syria transformed into a new arena of Iran's fight against Israel. The United States' decision to recognize Israel's sovereignty over the Golan Heights further serves Hezbollah's and Iran's agenda in southern Syria. However, the regime's record of avoiding direct confrontation with Israel suggests that Damascus will most likely push for quiet frontlines in the Golan Heights.

Looking ahead, it seems unlikely that Assad will be forced to choose between Iran and Russia. All three actors are united by flexible politics and common rivals, which gives each side room to make decisions in line with their own interests. Neither Russia nor Iran will try to eliminate the other's presence in Syria—both governments recognize that this would not be possible without inviting serious harm. And Syria, Russia, and Iran all understand that a weakened partner could ultimately lead to their own loss of power. In this context, Hezbollah's ties to Damascus will likely continue to be shaped by the same dynamics as before.

Notes

[1] Jubin Goodarzi, *Syria and Iran: Diplomatic Alliance and Power Politics in the Middle East* (London: I.B. Taurus, 2009), 87–88.

[2] Nadia von Maltzahn, *The Syria-Iran Axis: Cultural Diplomacy and International Relations in the Middle East* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2015), 19.

[3] Ibid., 21.

[4] This lens of pragmatism in regional alliances better explains the nuances in Iranian-Syrian relations during Hafez al-Assad's presidency. See Husayn Agha and Ahmad S. Khalidi, *Syria and Iran: Rivalry and Cooperation* (London: Pinter Pub Ltd, 1995), 2.

[5] Saddam Hussein's regime helped train the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood, Assad's archenemy, while Damascus became a new home for the Iraqi Shia opposition.

[6] Von Maltzahn, *The Syria-Iran Axis*, 21.

[7] Ibid., 23.

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