

Hezbollah in 2016: damaged goods or dangerous war machine?

April 2016

Key Points:

- Hezbollah is an armed, radical, Lebanese Shia group which is used by Iran as military leverage against Israel and whose political representatives and allies dominate the current Lebanese government. In March 2016, the six-member Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) formally categorised Hezbollah as a terrorist organisation, describing it as a “militia” and arguing that “Hezbollah’s incitement and terrorist acts in Syria, Yemen and Iraq are contrary to morality and human values”. Hezbollah’s military wing was designated as a terrorist group by the UK in 2008 and the European Union in 2013.
- Hezbollah decision to become heavily involved in the Syrian civil war alongside the Assad regime has further polarised an already fractured domestic political arena in Lebanon and generated retaliatory attacks against Hezbollah from within the country. The civil war has also altered its strategy against Israel with the group currently seeking to avoid an all-out military confrontation. However, the organisation continues to attempt to improve its military capacity for a future conflict with what it describes as a cancerous Zionist enemy.
- A future war between Israel and Hezbollah would likely be devastating with Hezbollah estimated to possess over 100,000 missiles – many of which are hidden amongst the civilian population of South Lebanon – thousands of which with a range and accuracy to strike cities and strategic sites throughout Israel. In February 2016, Hezbollah General Secretary Hassan Nasrallah threatened to attack Israel’s ammonia factory in Haifa, warning that the damage caused would be the equivalent of a nuclear bomb.

- Hezbollah’s sophisticated military capacity poses grave policy dilemmas for Israel, with the IDF preparing both defensive means – such as multi-tiered anti-missile technology – and offensive air and ground tactics to prevent or limit thousands of missiles from hitting civilian and strategic targets.

Hezbollah’s role in the Syrian civil war

- Once reduced to pursuing political power in Lebanon and fighting Israel, Hezbollah has expanded its modus operandi to become a regional player engaged in conflicts beyond its traditional area of operations and is now actively involved as Iran’s proxy in conflicts in Iraq and Yemen. However its main foreign battleground lies in the Syrian civil war.
- Motivated by its historical alliance with the Syrian regime as well as the strategic importance of preserving the so called Iranian axis or Shia Crescent (Iranian influence and sometimes de-facto control from Tehran through Baghdad to Beirut), Hezbollah entered the Syrian civil war with the aim of maintaining Assad’s regime and creating a ‘state within a state in Syria’ as an insurance policy to protect Iranian interests in case the regime were to fall. Syria also represents a key conduit for arms from Iran to Hezbollah and Israel has expressed concern that the chaos would facilitate more advanced strategic weapons falling into Hezbollah’s hands.
- [According to Israeli assessments](#), over 5,000 Hezbollah combatants are currently operating in Syria which comprises a quarter of the group’s entire regular fighting forces. These troops provide an essential reinforcement of the regime’s allied Iraqi/Shia forces, as well as giving training to regime forces such as Iraqi Hezbollah and Assaeb Al-Haq in urban and counterinsurgency operations

Hezbollah

The variety of missiles

Hezbollah possess ground-to-air and ground-to-sea missiles of varying range and payload.



FATEH-110



Yakhont



SA 17 & 22



Scud Missile

Estimated missile stockpile

100,000 - 150,000

Missiles fired by Hezbollah per day during the 2006 Second Lebanon War

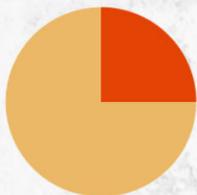
Hezbollah's current daily capabilities

118

1200

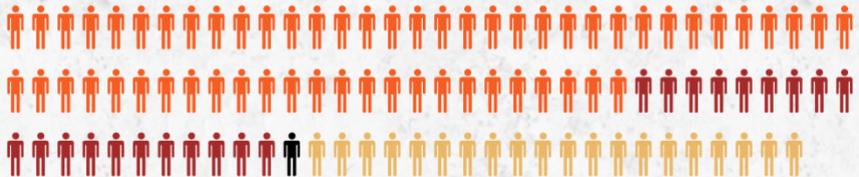
Hezbollah in Syria

20,000 Total forces
5,000 Fighting in Syria



25% of Hezbollah forces are currently active in the Syrian War

22.9m Syria's pre-war population



13.5m

Civilians requiring humanitarian aid within Syria

4.8m

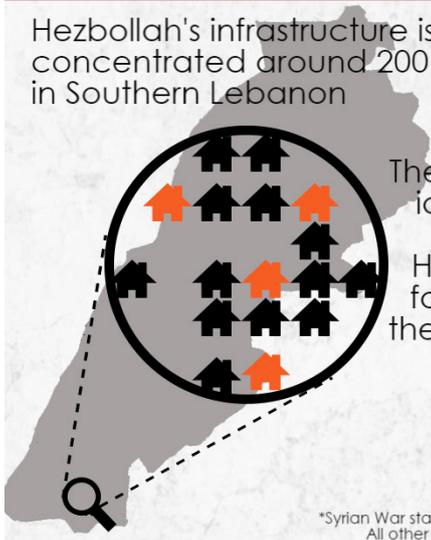
Syrian refugees abroad

250,000

UN estimate for Syrian war casualties

The Threat to Israel

Hezbollah's infrastructure is concentrated around 200 Shiite villages in Southern Lebanon



The IDF have identified 400 Hezbollah facilities in the village of Shaqra alone

Likely targets

Amonia Factory



Port



● Shtula
● Haifa

Offshore Gas Fields



Ben Gurion Airport



● Tel Aviv
● Jerusalem

Business Centres



● Beersheva

*Syrian War statistics courtesy of Syrian Observatory for Human Rights and United Nations. All other figures provided by BICOM's own research. Accurate as of 17/03/16

and being directly involved in combat operations in key battlefields such as Qusayr (June 2013), Qalamoun (May 2015) and the siege of Madaya, where a reported 40,000 Syrians are struggling for food. Hezbollah [is believed to have lost](#) between 1,300 - 1,500 members in the civil war and suffered over 5,000 injuries.

- Iran provides extensive military equipment and financial support to Hezbollah through a web of channels such as Iranian Revolutionary Guards Banks. At its peak, Hezbollah received an annual sum of approximately a billion dollars which was reduced in the years leading up to the July 2015 nuclear deal that provided sanctions relief to Iran. Despite the recent US Congressional “Hezbollah International Financing Prevention Act” – which imposes sanctions on any organisation or individual affiliated with Hezbollah that ‘knowingly facilitates a transaction’ – Hezbollah is expected to significantly upgrade its capacities as a consequence of the nuclear deal and is likely to have more freedom to act aggressively at both home and within Lebanon. One priority for Iran lies in upgrading the precision of Hezbollah’s rocket arsenal.

- Hezbollah was designated as a terrorist organisation by the United States in 1997 and the group remains on the Foreign Terrorist Organization and Specially Designated Terrorist lists. The UK makes a distinction between the organisation’s political and military wings, declaring the latter a terrorist group in 2008. While the EU initially believed that political engagement would moderate Hezbollah and that designating it as a terrorist organisation would create instability inside Lebanon, it did agree to blacklist Hezbollah’s military wing in 2013, following the terrorist attack against Israeli tourists in the Bulgarian coastal town of Burgas.

- [Disagreement existed](#) among [policy analysts](#) as to how the Russian military involvement in the Syrian civil war would affect Hezbollah. Some believed that Russia would have a restraining influence on Iranian-Hezbollah ambitions against Israel on the Golan. Others in Israel’s security establishment expressed concern that the Russian presence in Syria would facilitate the strengthening of the Iranian axis and its hold on the country, which would ultimately restrict Israel’s freedom of aerial activity. While reports that Russia gave Hezbollah access to its sophisticated weapons were likely

inaccurate, [concern](#) existed that Hezbollah’s proximity to Russian military forces would enhance the group’s on-going shift toward a more offensive-minded strategy, with significant implications for the planning and conduct of any future conflicts against Israel. Indeed, in its planning, the IDF now relates to Hezbollah more as an army than as a militia.

- While it is still too early to fully analyse the consequences of the recent Russian troop withdrawal from Syria, it is likely that the vacuum created will be filled by Iranian or Hezbollah troops, thus strengthening their foothold in the country.

The consequences of the Syrian Civil War on Lebanese domestic politics

- Composed mostly of Shia, Sunnis, and Christians, Lebanon is deeply divided along confessional and sectarian lines and suffers from continued political instability. In 2013 it experienced a 10 month political deadlock as parties aligned with Hezbollah and a Sunni-led rival bloc pursued a power struggle. Furthermore, discord between Hezbollah, Christians parties, and Lebanon’s moderate Sunnis has hamstrung the parliament and left a presidential vacancy since May 2014.

- Hezbollah is actively involved in Lebanon’s domestic politics and has previously used its independent military forces, which are the most powerful in Lebanon, to intimidate and sometimes eliminate political opposition. Four of its operatives were indicted in 2011 by an international tribunal for the 2005 assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri. Meanwhile, [Saudi Arabian officials fear](#) that Hezbollah is also extending influence and control over the Lebanese Armed forces, which is one of the reasons that led Riyadh to cut its military aid to Lebanon.

- The deep divisions in Lebanon surrounding the Syrian civil war and Hezbollah’s central role alongside the Assad regime have further polarised an already fractured political arena and generated retaliatory attacks against Hezbollah from within Lebanon. Between 2013 and 2015, the country witnessed more than a dozen suicide and car bombings, the majority of which directed at Shia and Alawites. In November 2015, a double suicide bombing in Shia neighbourhood of Beirut

Bourj al Barajneh, known to be a stronghold of Hezbollah, killed 40 and wounded more than 200. [Some criticism of Hezbollah](#) has even been heard from within the Lebanese Shia community with former Hezbollah secretary-general Subhi Tufayli criticising the organisation's role as "mercenaries serving Russia's policy" in the civil war and arguing that Hezbollah's weapons are "a disaster that will turn its citizens into victims of revenge."

Hezbollah's current strategy vs. Israel

- In addition to trying to increase its stockpile of strategic weapons that could be put to use in a future confrontation with Israel, Hezbollah is also attempting to create an active resistance front against Israel on the Golan Heights and to recruit fighters from Druze villages in the areas controlled by the Syrian army.

- While Israel has no wish to involve itself in the Syrian civil war, it has declared that cross border attacks, the transfer of 'game changing' weapons, and the establishment of Hezbollah-Iranian operational infrastructure in Southern Syria represent red lines and that it reserves the right to act to prevent them. While Israel has not publically admitted to any military actions in Syria, international media reports have claimed that in recent years Israel has carried out several pinpoint strikes to disrupt the movement of sophisticated weapons from Iran to Hezbollah via Syria.

- Due to its heavy involvement in the Syrian civil war, Hezbollah is currently seeking to avoid an all-out military confrontation with Israel. Instead, the organisation has primarily concentrated its efforts on limited tit-for-tat retaliation after reported Israeli attacks against its operatives and equipment. In February 2014, a reported rocket attack against Hezbollah targets along the Syrian Lebanese border was met with unclaimed low-level attacks along the Golan demarcation line and by the detonation of an explosive device within the Shebaa Farms area. In January 2015, Hezbollah responded in a similar manner following a reported Israeli operation targeting Iranian and Hezbollah fighters in the Syrian Golan. Hezbollah has generally focused on the Shebaa Farms area as it claims that the area is occupied Lebanese territory, despite Israel and the UN's position that it comprises part of the Golan Heights.

- In addition to its actions against Israel in the region, Hezbollah has a history of attacking Jewish and Israeli targets abroad. In recent years Hezbollah plots either failed or were foiled as far afield as South Africa, Azerbaijan, Thailand, Peru, India, Nigeria, Cyprus, and Turkey. In Bulgaria in July 2012, Hezbollah operatives blew up a bus of Israeli tourists at the Burgas airport killing five Israeli tourists and their Bulgarian bus driver. Hezbollah has also reportedly recently engaged in [cyber espionage attempts](#), including the [hacking into Israeli security cameras](#).

A future Israel-Hezbollah war

- A future war between Israel and Hezbollah would likely cause heavy damage to both sides. Hezbollah is estimated to possess over 100,000 missiles, thousands of which have a range and accuracy to strike cities and strategic sites throughout Israel. The organization is also thought to possess Yakhont ground-to-sea missiles, which could threaten Israel's ports and off-shore gas installations; ground-to-air SA17 and SA22 missiles, which have the capacity to undermine Israel's freedom of flight in northern Israel and Lebanon; Scud missiles, which could carry chemical warheads; Iranian Fateh-110 long range missiles; and UAVs (unmanned aerial vehicles). In February 2016, Hezbollah General Secretary Hassan Nasrallah threatened to attack Israel's ammonia factory in Haifa in a future war, warning that it would be the equivalent of dropping a nuclear bomb.

- Israeli intelligence officials estimate that Hezbollah has the capacity to fire at least 1200 missiles per day which it could sustain over a period of several weeks, a number significantly higher than the daily rate of 118 achieved during the Second Lebanon War in 2006. IDF officials also expect Hezbollah to use its special-forces Radwan units to attempt to take over a civilian community on the northern border and kidnap soldiers or civilians. Some Israeli communities such as Shtula, Metula and Shlomi are located just several hundred meters from the Israeli-Lebanese border fence. In addition to raining thousands of missiles onto the Israeli home-front, other Hezbollah goals during a conflict are likely to include strategic targets like the IDF headquarters in Tel Aviv and bases throughout the country, electricity and water infrastructure, Ben-Gurion airport and as well as the oil refineries

in Haifa and the country's seaports.

- Hezbollah's sophisticated military capacity poses grave policy dilemmas for Israel and IDF chief of staff Lt. Gen. Gadi Eisenkot has described Hezbollah as the biggest threat currently facing the country. In light of this threat, Israeli military planners are preparing both defensive tactics and offensive tactics to prevent or alleviate thousands of missiles from hitting civilian and strategic targets.

- On the defensive side, Israel continues to develop a sophisticated multi-tiered missile defence system which includes Iron Dome batteries (short range), the soon to be operational David's Sling system (medium to long range), and the Arrow missile system (long range). However Israel does not have the capacity to prevent all of Hezbollah's missiles from hitting their targets and may need to prioritise protecting strategic national sites such as its electricity grid over its civilian population in the case of war. In addition to missile defence, the IDF Israel is constructing a defensive barrier – man-made cliffs that have been dug into hills – alongside parts of the border to prevent or delay potential Hezbollah infiltration. One such barrier recently completed was near the Israeli border community of Matat and is 1,700 meters long and 10 meters high.

- Targeting Hezbollah's missiles pose serious challenges for Israel. The organisation is believed to have moved most of its military infrastructure into and around the perimeters of approximately 200 Shiite villages in southern Lebanon, with the IDF reportedly identifying approximately 400 military sites and facilities – some of which are underground – within the southern Lebanese village of Shaqra alone. While Hezbollah aims to use these civilian villages as human shields, Israel has repeatedly stated that in a future conflict any building housing Hezbollah weaponry will not have immunity to being attacked. Israel and many other states have long called for Hezbollah to be disarmed in accordance with UN Security Council Resolutions 1559 and 1701, which prohibits all armed militias from operating anywhere in Lebanon and calls for the Lebanese army to be the only military force in the country.

- The seriousness of the military threat posed by Hezbollah coupled with the imperative to destroy its missile storage arsenals as quickly as

possible has led the IDF to plan a combination of air operations and ground deployment of multiple divisions into southern Lebanese territory in the case of war. Israel has also warned that Lebanese national infrastructure that facilitates Hezbollah's war machine will also not be immune.

Conclusion

- Hezbollah comprises an integral part of the Iranian axis and its fighters represent the most sophisticated troops fighting on behalf of the Assad regime in the Syrian civil war. While the organisation pays a heavy price for this involvement – with the loss of both personnel and domestic legitimacy – it continues to exert a disproportionate influence over the Lebanese state and has developed additional battlefield experience and resilience. Moreover, its proximity to Russian forces from the end of September 2015 until mid-March 2016 helped Hezbollah to further professionalise its fighting forces.

- While the Syrian civil war restrains Hezbollah's policy vis-à-vis Israel, the organisation – together with Iran – continues to try and establish military infrastructure on the Golan and to improve its already significant rocket arsenal, a strategy that the current Syrian ceasefire is unlikely to alter. An all-out Israel-Hezbollah conflict – which would have devastating consequences for Israel and Lebanon – is unlikely for the time being, although the potential for miscalculation on either side does exist. Meanwhile the sanctions relief provided to Iran by the nuclear deal is likely to facilitate the enhancement of Hezbollah's rocket arsenal, further strengthening its power in Syria and its capacity to hit Israeli cities and strategic targets.

This strategic assessment was produced by BICOM's Research Team.

For more information please contact:

Charlotte Henry

Senior Press Officer

charlotteh@bicom.org.uk

020 7636 5500