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

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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.

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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

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