

# Hizbullah's expanded role in Syria threatens Israel

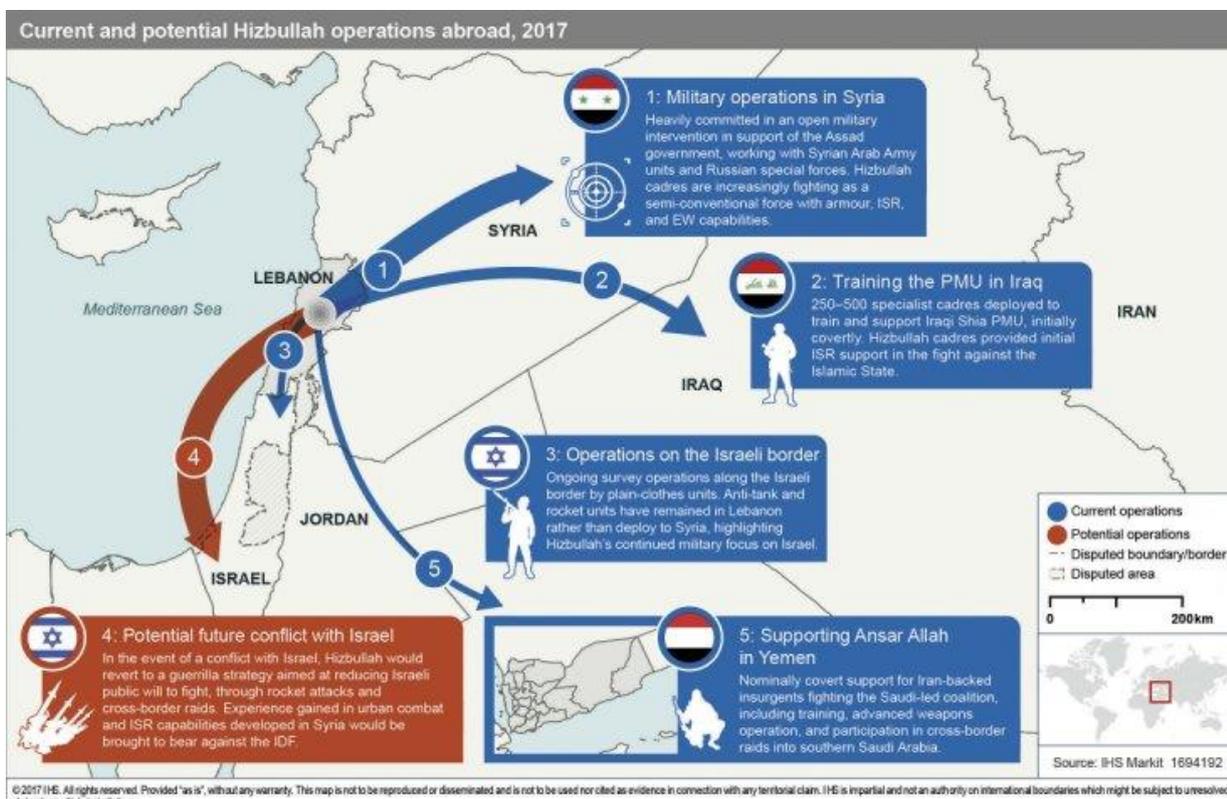
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Hizbullah's role in the Syrian war and its presence in Iraq and Yemen have made the militant group into a regional military actor. *Nicholas Blanford* explains the likelihood of the organisation deploying new capabilities that it has learned in Syria in a future war with Israel.

The war in Syria and conflicts in Iraq and Yemen have provided an opportunity for Lebanon's Iran-backed Hizbullah militant group to expand from a powerful but localised, asymmetrical organisation focused on the Arab-Israel conflict into a regional military actor and enabler of Iranian power projection across the Middle East.

Hizbullah is present in Syria in a full-blown and public military intervention to defend Syrian president Bashar al-Assad's government. It has had a presence in Iraq since 2014 where it is currently providing training and military advice to the Al-Hashd al-Shaabi (Popular Mobilisation Units: PMU), the 150,000-strong umbrella group for various Shia militias under the guidance of the Iranian Islamic Revolution Guards Corp (IRGC), as part of the broader effort to defeat the Islamic State, and it maintains a covert military assistance mission in Yemen where it is training the Ansar Allah militia battling the Saudi Arabia-led coalition and its Yemeni allies.

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Current and potential Hizbullah operations abroad, 2017 (IHS)

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## **Lessons learned in Syria**

Hizbullah's intervention in Syria since 2012 is its largest-ever military operation, greater in scale than even its resistance campaign against the IDF's 1982-2000 occupation of south Lebanon. The battlefield environment and the enemy that it faces are completely different to those for which Hizbullah had previously trained. Instead of the familiar hills and valleys of south Lebanon, Hizbullah found itself deploying to different geographical theatres ranging from barren mountains, flat arable landscapes, and semi-desert to cramped urban environments. The enemy was not the soldiers of the IDF, but fellow Arab Muslims who had adopted similar irregular methods of fighting and weaponry as used by Hizbullah.

Hizbullah's cadres found themselves fighting in larger, platoon- and company-sized units and alongside other armed forces, such as the Syrian Arab Army (SAA), Iraqi Shia paramilitary forces, and various Syrian loyalist militias. Since Russia's intervention in Syria in September 2015, Hizbullah fighters have been operating alongside Russian special forces troops in various fronts in northern Syria.

In November 2016, Russian officers and Hizbullah field commanders met for the first time, according to Lebanon's Al-Akhbar newspaper, which is close to Hizbullah. The meeting was held after the Russian officers had been impressed with Hizbullah's battlefield performance and wished to co-operate on a tactical level, Al-Akhbar said.

A veteran Hizbullah commander, who has served multiple tours in Syria, told *Jane's* in a wide-ranging interview in December 2016 that the relationship between Hizbullah fighters and Russian troops on the ground was not a new development. He said Hizbullah and "the cream of the Russian army", specifically special forces and anti-tank missile (ATM) teams, had been fighting together in Aleppo for their mutual benefit. "If you play with a good football team, you will learn something from them. We are learning from them and they are learning from us," he said.

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## **Cost of the intervention**

Despite the benefits of the lessons learned and the acquisition of new equipment, Hizbullah's intervention in Syria has come at a great price in terms of casualties, a domestic political backlash in Lebanon, financial problems, issues of morale among the cadres, and the tarnishing of its image as a champion of anti-Israel resistance in the eyes of Sunnis across the region.

*Jane's* estimates that Hizbullah has lost more than 2,500 fighters since 2012 and suffered perhaps three times that number in wounded fighters. The heavily guarded Hizbullah-run Rassoul al-Azzam hospital in southern Beirut handles a steady turnover of casualties from Syrian battlefields. In 2016, Hizbullah purchased the St George Hospital in the nearby suburb of Hadeth, south of Beirut, to take up the overspill. According to sources close to Hizbullah, in 2016 the war in Syria cost the organisation around USD20 million a month, a significant drain on its financial resources.

Hizbullah continued to recruit new fighters during this period, but the need to deploy fighters quickly to Syrian fronts, while ensuring that the best fighters continued to man the southern front with Israel, has led to a lowering of its once rigorous standards.



*A montage of images posted on Twitter in November 2016 showing a Hizbullah armoured parade in Qusayr in Syria. Much of this equipment would be of no use in a future conflict with Israel, which would likely lead Hizbullah to revert to a hybrid guerilla strategy, but it plays an important role in the Syrian operation. (IHS Markit)*

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Traditionally, the recruitment and preparation process took months, if not years, and involved extensive background checks, religious indoctrination, and military training before a recruit could be said to be a fully fledged member of the organisation.

That procedure is still in effect for core personnel. However, Hizbullah also sweeps up volunteer Lebanese Shias lured by the promise of wage payments of USD600-700 a month and the prestige of joining the "Islamic Resistance", the name of Hizbullah's armed wing. They are given a month of basic training in Hizbullah camps in the Bekaa valley in east Lebanon before being sent to Syria. These recruits do not necessarily share the same level of deep religious belief and the core discipline of the older generation of fighters.

The war in Syria has had an impact not only on the Shia support base in Lebanon, given the cost of the conflict on the community, but also among the cadres themselves. *Jane's* has heard numerous anecdotes of fighters refusing to serve further tours in Syria or others who have left the organisation altogether. While the phenomenon of dissent is believed to be relatively minimal, it is unprecedented for an organisation that traditionally boasts a cast iron sense of discipline and vibrant esprit de corps.

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## **Conflict with Israel**

Much of Hizbullah's Syria skillset will be irrelevant in a future war with Israel. Hizbullah's "armoured brigade" of ageing Soviet-era vehicles has some utility against a relatively lightly-armed enemy in Syria, but is redundant against the IDF. Hizbullah's leadership clearly understands the differences between the Syrian and Israeli theatres and will take what it needs from its Syria experience to augment its anti-Israel military doctrine and ignore the rest. "What has been prepared for Israel differs from the battle we are fighting [in Syria] against the armed groups," Hizbullah secretary-general Sheikh Hassan Nasrallah said in August 2014.

Hizbullah will not fight in large formations nor call in airstrikes, but will revert to its earlier low-signature, small-unit configuration. Perhaps the only vehicles displayed at the Qusayr parade in

November that might have some utility in the next war with Israel would be the handful of all-terrain vehicles (ATVs) mounted with AT-4 Spriggan anti-tank missile (ATM) launchers.

Where Hizbullah has benefited from the Syria conflict is the experience gained by combat cadres; improved fire-and-manoevre tactics; and utilising intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) data to develop more complex offensive operations. This has hardened the view among the Hizbullah leadership that in the next war with Israel, specially-trained cadres will cross the border to conduct ambushes and raids, a development first revealed by *Jane's* in May 2008 and subsequently alluded to by Nasrallah in a speech three years later. The IDF takes the threat of cross-border penetration seriously and in late 2016 bolstered its northern frontier defences, placing concrete blocks at potential breach points and excavating the sides of valleys adjacent to the border into unclimbable sheer cliffs.

Although much of the attention on Hizbullah has been on the organisation's activities in Syria, it has not abandoned the Israel front. Many of its top fighters, especially the ATM teams and the rocket units, have stayed in Lebanon. Since early December 2016, plain-clothed Hizbullah units have been conducting a thorough, but low-key, survey of the Lebanon-Israel border, taking extensive measurements of adjacent terrain, including slope gradients, and photographing Israel's own new defences on the other side of the fence, sources based in south Lebanon told *Jane's* in February 2017. The survey, which is part operational planning and part psychological needling of IDF troops watching from the other side of the fence, underlines that Hizbullah's anti-Israel activities have not slowed despite its involvement in Syria.



*Hizbullah fighters stand atop a car mounted with a mock rocket as they parade during a rally in the southern village of Seksakiyeh, Lebanon, on 9 October 2016. Jane's estimates that Hizbullah has lost more than 2,500 combatants in the Syrian conflict since 2012. (PA)*

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The scale of the next war between Hezbollah and Israel promises to dwarf the 2006 conflict. In the past, the battleground has remained limited to south Lebanon and northern Israel. However, given the range of Hezbollah's rocket arsenal and its ability to launch them from far north of Lebanon's southern border area, more territory in both countries would be affected in a future conflict.

The fear of a mutually destructive war has helped keep a relative level of calm along the Lebanon-Israel border for the past decade. However, tensions flared in February 2017 after US president Donald Trump's administration signalled that it intended to roll back Iranian influence across the region. There is concern in Lebanon that Washington's newfound confrontational stance towards Iran could encourage Israel to launch an attack against Hezbollah. In response, Nasrallah delivered several blunt public warnings to help bolster Hezbollah's deterrence posture.

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### **Operations in Iraq**

In Iraq, Hezbollah fields between 250 and 500 specialist cadres who first deployed in mid-June 2014 in response to the seizure of Mosul in northern Iraq by the Islamic State and the group's subsequent southbound advance towards Baghdad.

The original team was composed of seasoned veterans and was responsible for advising, training, and co-ordinating the PMU. Its initial role was related to ISR work to build up a picture of the military strength of the Islamic State, its areas of deployment, and the durability of its alliances with other Iraqi Sunni groups.

Although Hezbollah initially did not declare this new deployment, Nasrallah was reported by some Lebanese newspapers to have told a private gathering in 2014 that he was willing "to sacrifice martyrs in Iraq five times more than what we sacrificed in Syria in order to protect the shrines", a reference to the burial places of imams Ali and Hussein and other early Shia leaders.

In February 2015, Nasrallah admitted to a "limited presence" of Hezbollah cadres in Iraq. The following month, he revealed that Iraq had requested Hezbollah's assistance after the Islamic State's capture of Mosul in the form of "leaders and cadres who would help them form groups, run operations, train, and also fight in some critical positions ... We used to fight and are still fighting in Iraq under the leadership of the ... [PMU]".

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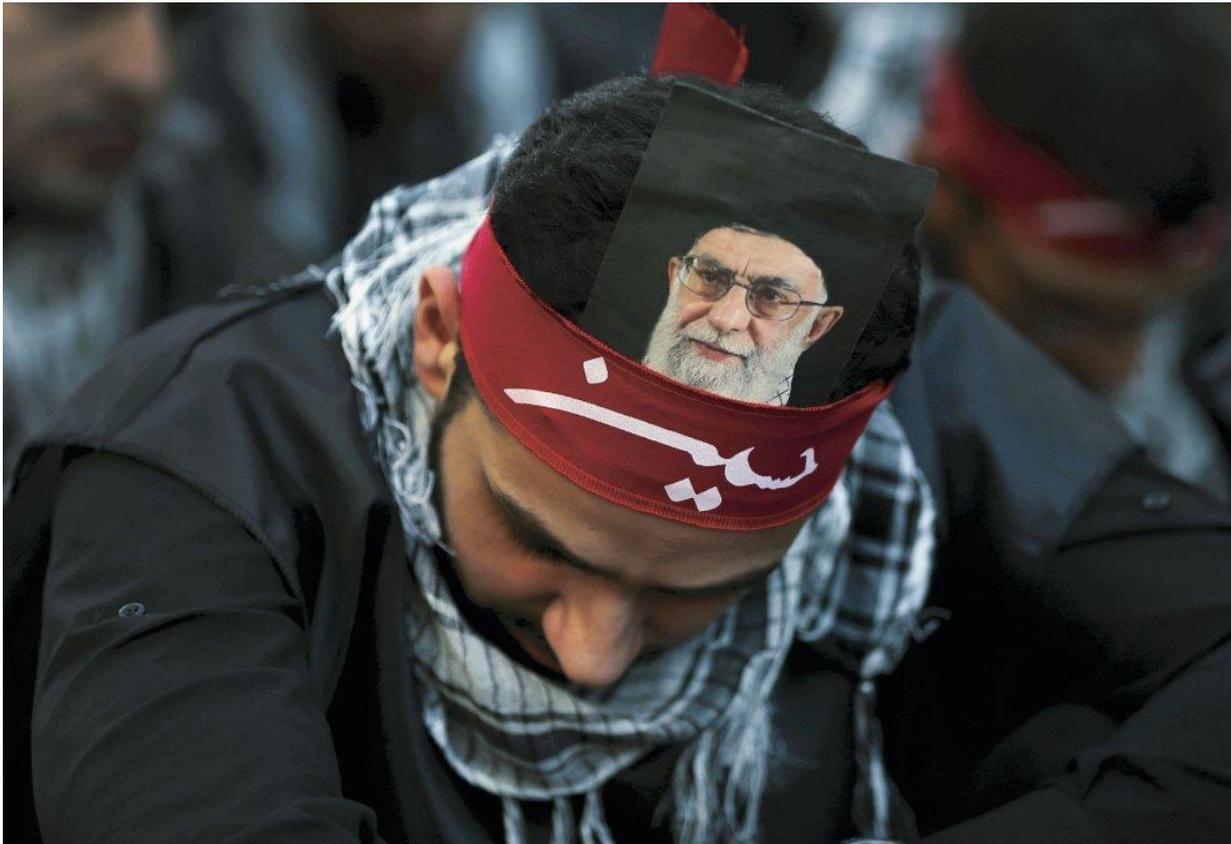
### **Presence in Yemen**

Hezbollah's presence in Yemen has not been publicly acknowledged by the party leadership. However, the relationship between the organisation and Ansar Allah, the Houthi militia, is well known and dates from long before the current conflict. Iran has an interest in supporting Ansar Allah, particularly since the onset of the Saudi-led Operation Decisive Storm in March 2015. Iran's support for the Houthis is a means of putting pressure on Saudi Arabia and carving out a new sphere of influence (albeit relatively limited) on its southern border.

According to a classified United Nations report from March 2015, Iran has been providing arms to Ansar Allah since at least 2009. The report, as seen by the Agence France Presse, cited five instances of Iranian ships delivering materiel to Yemen, including small arms, ATMs, and anti-aircraft missiles.

Hizbullah hosts Ansar Allah officials in Lebanon, providing office space and accommodation for them in southern Beirut. A number of Yemenis have moved to the southern suburbs of Beirut since 2015, multiple sources living in the district told *Jane's* in November and December 2016. Hizbullah also treats wounded Yemenis in its hospitals in Beirut, alongside the party's own casualties from Syria, sources close to the organisation told *Jane's* in February 2017.

Nevertheless, Ansar Allah officials play down the levels of support that they receive from Iran and Hizbullah. "In Yemen, we don't need Hizbullah and we don't need Iran. We have enough fighters," one Ansar Allah official living in Beirut told *Jane's* in late 2016. Hizbullah also treats wounded Yemenis in its hospitals in Beirut, alongside its own casualties from Syria, sources close to the organisation told *Jane's* in February 2017.



*A Hizbullah supporter, with a portrait of the Iranian supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei on his head, listens to the death story of Imam Hussein during the holy day of Ashoura, in Beirut, Lebanon, on 12 October 2016. Hizbullah has demonstrated its value as a force multiplier for Iran-backed or allied groups across the Middle East. (PA)*

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However, the Ansar Allah official warned that if Saudi Arabia and its allies continued prosecuting their war against Ansar Allah, Iranian and Hizbullah influence in Yemen would increase. "If you want to see Iran and Hizbullah take over the region, then keep fighting us," he said, addressing Saudi Arabia. "If the war in Yemen continues, there will be changes in Yemen. You will see Yemen become like Iran. We will make our own Yemeni Hizbullah." As such, while the current Saudi-led conflict in Yemen continues, it is unlikely that Iran and Hizbullah will end their support for Ansar Allah.

Hizbullah's support includes training selected Ansar Allah fighters at its camps in the Bekaa Valley. Speaking to *Jane's* in December 2016, a Hizbullah commander admitted that the organisation had

been training the group "for a long time ... The problem with them [Ansar Allah] is that they are inexperienced in some techniques and weapons". He claimed that "all the firing of the missiles [in Yemen] and the special operations are by us". *Jane's* could not independently corroborate this claim. Approximately 20 rockets have been launched against Saudi Arabia since March 2015. They include the Burkan-1, an Iranian-modified version of a Russian Scud missile with an 800 km range, and the Zelzal-2 and Zelzal-3 missiles, both produced by Iran, which have a range of 200 km and 250 km, respectively.

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