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Iran uses Lebanese to project its regional power



Last week, Saudi Arabia **announced** that the spy cell it had arrested in March, and which included a **reportedly** key Lebanese

member, had “direct links” to Iranian intelligence. When thinking about the Iranian threat, it’s useful not to separate Tehran’s nuclear program from the regional web of proxies it has built over the years. Both are an expression of the same objective: Iran's bid for primacy in the region. Hezbollah always has been at the heart of Iran's effort to construct this regional infrastructure and to extend the Islamic Republic's reach in the Arab world.

Iran’s and Hezbollah’s subversive activity in the Gulf Arab states has become increasingly visible in the last few years as Tehran has pushed aggressively to project its power in the Arab world, with a particular eye on its primary regional adversary, Saudi Arabia. In the aftermath of the ‘Arab Spring’ uprisings, Yemen has emerged as a natural focal point for Iranian activity. Yemen is of great importance for Tehran not only as a pressure point against Saudi Arabia and the Gulf, but also as a critical node in its weapons smuggling **network** to east Africa and Sudan, and from there into Gaza.

Iran’s operations in Yemen, as elsewhere in the region, rely greatly on Hezbollah’s base in Lebanon. In a 1984 interview, a former Iranian ambassador to Lebanon, Hojatoleslam Fakh-Rohani, articulated how Iran viewed Lebanon’s, and consequently Hezbollah’s, place in its regional strategy.

By the time of that interview, the collapse of the already weak Lebanese central government had opened the door for Iran to establish its foothold in the country, bypassing government authority, which Fakh-Rohani dubbed “the biggest obstacle to starting Islamic movements in the world.” Once Hezbollah was established, the next step was to use the Lebanese base as a springboard for activity elsewhere in the Arab world. In Fakh-Rohani’s view, Lebanon constituted the “heart of the Arab countries,” which could be used to spread ideas to these countries and influence their populations, in the hope of spawning pro-Iranian Islamic movements in them.

In operational terms, the former Iranian ambassador was drawing on the experience of Iran’s Islamist opposition in Lebanon in the 1970s. There, these cadres organized, received training, and were able to logistically support their activities in Iran and elsewhere in exile. In addition, they were able to print and distribute their literature and indoctrinate recruits.

Iran and Hezbollah quickly turned Lebanon into the kind of base that Fakh-Rohani depicted. Already at the time of the Iranian ambassador’s interview, Hezbollah was acting as Iran’s arm in the region, staging attacks against Gulf interests during the Iran-Iraq war.

In the 1990s, there was an attempt to cover up the overt sectarianism of the previous decade. Hezbollah posed as the ultimate banner carrier of Palestine and of 'resistance' against Israel. It crafted and perfected an image of itself as a pan-Islamic and pan-Arab resistance movement and as big brother to other – Sunni – 'resistance' movements. While this was important image management, one that conferred more legitimacy on the group and its Iranian patron, it also opened the door operationally to spread Iranian influence to other militant groups in the region. Hezbollah's training of Iraqi Shiite groups, to say nothing of Hamas, is one example.

By 2005, this image had already begun to fade and by 2008 it was, for all intents and purposes, finished. However, while the heyday of 'resistance' stardom is now gone, the operational infrastructure built over the last two decades is not.

The difference is that the sectarian underpinnings are once again clear. As analyst Jonathan Spyer **put it**, "a Sunni-Shiite arc of conflict, centered on the rival interests of Tehran and Riyadh is now bisecting the Middle East." It's now recognized that Hezbollah is actively on the ground on all these fronts, advancing Iran's strategic interests. Aside from its combat role in Syria, Hezbollah/Quds Force cells have been active in the United Arab Emirates, Kuwait, and **probably Bahrain**, in addition to cases such as the busted cell in Saudi Arabia. In fact, the Saudi cell appears to resemble another cell **disrupted** in Kuwait in 2010, where a Lebanese man was the key liaison between the locals and the Iranians. But the case of Yemen perhaps best illustrates the original conception Iran had for Hezbollah's role.

Over the past year, reports abounded of Iran and Hezbollah's **activity** in Yemen. In March of last year, the US envoy to Sanaa Gerald Feierstein **told** *Al-Hayat* that Hezbollah was helping Iran extend its influence both in northern and southern Yemen, and establish a foothold in the Arabian Peninsula.

Feierstein's comments followed **reports** of increased arms smuggling by the Quds Force to Yemen. These efforts are ongoing. In **January** of this year, other arms shipments were intercepted and found to be **carrying** a number of weapons systems, including **surface-to-air missiles** intended for the Houthis in northern Yemen. Aside from shipping weapons, in October 2012 a Yemeni military source **told** *Asharq al-Awsat* that Hezbollah technicians were helping the Houthis manufacture and assemble short range rockets.

What's more, Hezbollah's role is not merely of a military nature. The Shiite group and its Iranian patrons have also sought to push their agenda through organizing political conferences and media workshops in Lebanon. As NOW **reported** in February, The Aden

Live Channel, owned by former South Yemen President Ali Salim al-Beidh, has moved its headquarters to the Hezbollah stronghold of Dahiyeh. Likewise, the Houthis' Al-Massira TV channel now broadcasts from Beirut. In addition, according to the report, Hezbollah's Al-Manar TV recently held a workshop for employees of Yemeni Al-Sahat TV.

Projecting its power in the region has been a core objective of the Islamic Republic from the outset. It has pursued this goal through subversion and regional penetration, using a patiently constructed structure of assets. At the heart of this structure stands Hezbollah. The Iranian vision articulated by Fakhro-Rohani in 1984 of Lebanon as a base from which to spread Iranian influence in the region has largely been realized.

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