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 **LEBANON / SYRIA**

## Hezbollah torn apart over Syria

**On the eve of Hezbollah's ninth annual congress, the organisation's political and military leaders are in sharp disagreement over the Syrian crisis.**

Officially **Hezbollah** is unanimous in its support of **Bashar al-Assad's** regime. However internally, the political and military leadership of the *Shi'ite* party which has the biggest number of parliamentary seats in Lebanon, are at odds over Syria. The subject looks set to be a priority at Hezbollah's ninth annual congress, which secretary-general **Hassan Nasrallah** will open on September.

Ahead of the gathering, the movement's number two Sheik **Naim Kassem** travelled to Tehran at the beginning of August to meet Iran's supreme leader Ayatollah **Ali Khamenei**, accompanied by **Mohamed Yazbek**, Hezbollah's political head of the Bekaa region and **Ibrahim Amin al-Sayyed**, head of the movement's political council. At the meeting Kassem, who is jockeying with Nasrallah for leadership of the movement ([IOL 660](#)), argued that Hezbollah should limit its engagement in Syria to avoid the devastating consequences it would suffer in the event of the regime's fall. However the initiative went down badly with Khamenei, despite the support Kassem has from up-and-coming young party officials.

The upper ranks of Hezbollah remain dominated by military and security chiefs who are entirely behind Assad. Although the numbers of Hezbollah troops fighting alongside the pro-regime Shabiha are not high - some 50 have already lost their lives - more than 2000 Hezbollah fighters are currently deployed along the border between Lebanon and Syria between the towns of Zabani, in the governorate of Damascus, and Rastan, in the governorate of Homs, to prevent infiltration into Syria from Lebanese territory.

This strategy was approved by **Said Jalili**, the head of Iran's **Supreme National Security Council**, who attended a two-hour meeting with Nasrallah in Beirut on August 6. Jalili also approved appointments of new military chiefs in the south of the country that will be announced during the congress.

Although he has been in hiding since the **Special Tribunal for Lebanon** accused him of directing the suicide bombing that killed **Rafik Hariri** ([IOL 645](#)), **Mustafa Badreddine** will stay on as Hezbollah's military leader, and **Ali Youssef Chami**, Nasrallah's nephew, remains the organisation's head of counter-intelligence.