

Hezbollah cutting costs as Iranian aid dries up

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Sources close to the central command at Hezbollah told The Daily Star that the party has begun to take budget-cutting measures due to the shortage of Iranian aid caused by the Islamic Republic's tough economic situation.

Although Iran's economy is expected to improve in the coming months if it reaches an agreement with the West over its nuclear program by a July 20 deadline, the Islamic Republic is also helping the Syrian government cover its fiscal deficit, a strain that is less likely to end soon.

The U.S. and European countries have been keen on monitoring Hezbollah's funding sources in Latin America, Africa and other Asian countries, with a special focus on religious organizations connected to the party. These organizations and the businessmen involved with them are said to be the main source of donations in these countries. Recently, for example, Germany banned a charitable foundation after it discovered its connections to one of Hezbollah's organizations.

Most of the money sent to Hezbollah comes from the African continent and is under the supervision of one of the party's top officials, the sources said.

The sources also pointed to the huge financial impact of Hezbollah's involvement in Syria.

Tehran, which uses Hezbollah as a tool to implement its regional agenda, wants to deepen its power and control in Syria, and the sources believe that it also plans to increase its strategic influence in south Lebanon. The claim is backed up by a recent statement by an aide to Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, Yahya Rahim Safavi, who controversially described south Lebanon as Iran's first line of defense.

These difficult times have forced Hezbollah's military wing – also known as the “Jihad Council” – to ask non-functional cells and the party's external security apparatus to find new sources of funding. The instruction to these cells – which are spread around Russia, Romania, Germany, France and some parts of America – to find new sources of money seems especially urgent now that European security services are closely monitoring individuals suspected of being connected to Hezbollah.

According to sources in the party, Hezbollah has also fired many employees working within the party's social, health, media and service institutions to cut costs.

In addition to this, the party has reduced its aid for Sunni civil and scholarly organizations that are close to Hezbollah.

The same sources were informed of discussions within the party about a possible withdrawal from Syria. This comes at a time when the party believes it has almost succeeded in returning control over most of Syria to the government's army.

A decision on the matter is expected to be made if the party is able to totally curb the activities of fundamentalist groups and put an end to car bombings targeting areas in Lebanon.

There will be no withdrawal until Iran gives Hezbollah Secretary-General Sayyed Hasan Nasrallah the green light.

Although there are several factors at play, Iran's decision is also based on its negotiations with the U.S, the sources said.