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ISBN 978-965-218-155-8

Preface

Amb. Dore Gold

There is no adversarial state in the Middle East as challenging to understand as Lebanon. Unlike Israel's other Arab neighbors, Lebanon is a state with a Shiite Muslim plurality. In fact, it is a state within a Shiite state headed by Hizbullah. As a result, for many years now, Lebanon has had special ties with Iran, as well as Iraq, and with other states containing substantial Shiite populations. Understanding the complexity of Middle Eastern politics in the context of the Lebanese state requires far more than mastering current events. It requires a deep understanding of all the dimensions of Lebanon as a whole.

Brig.-Gen. (ret.) Dr. Shimon Shapira is one of the rare scholars who has been able to truly understand the struggle that transpired between Israel and Lebanon since 1982. He works with original sources in Arabic and Farsi. He understands the significance of Shiite practices, many of which have little similarity to the ceremonies practiced in Sunni Islam. It is no wonder that as Israel's engagement in Lebanon grew, his scholarship served as an important source to help the Israeli security establishment understand the state with which they had become engaged. Most importantly, for those who incorrectly saw Hizbullah as chiefly a local Lebanese phenomenon, Shapira's analysis provides an important corrective that stresses the role of Iran and brings its quest to create a Middle Eastern empire into correct proportion.

Hassan Nasrallah unravelling the Lebanese flag, reknitting it into the flag of Iran.

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Iran Views Lebanon as Part of Its Territory

At the root of the struggle between Israel and Hizbullah, already being waged for almost four decades, stands Iran. It views Lebanon as part of the territory of the Islamic Republic, which is led by the *velayat-e faqih* (Rule of the Jurisprudent) – first Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, subsequently Ali Khamenei. From the Iranian revolutionary perspective, geographical borders are of no significance. The strategic depth that protects the Islamic Republic extends from Iran in the east to the shores of the Mediterranean Sea in the West and includes Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon, as well as Yemen and the Persian Gulf states in the south.

Iran seeks to establish its Islamic empire among the Shiite populations of the region while denying any importance to the national component, instead granting these populations collective expression in the form of movements, parties, and organizations whose task is to challenge the nation-states in which they operate and to shape them by building a fighting Islamic society with military capabilities that is exclusively loyal to the leader of Iran, and that affords Iran active involvement in the *jihad* against Israel.

Lebanon was the Islamic empire's first target. Over the past decade it has fallen like a ripe fruit into Iran's hands. Through Hizbullah, Iran has taken control of the institutions of the Lebanese state and turned it into a failed state whose stability has collapsed amid severe economic and political corruption that threatens its demise. Meanwhile, Iraq and Syria have fallen, and Iran is using Yemen's territory to wage the struggle against Saudi Arabia, whose legitimate control of the Islamic holy places Iran has put in question.

Iran Creates Hizbullah

The Hizbullah movement was founded in the summer of 1982 by Iran, which intended it to be the spearhead of the states exporting the Islamic Revolution to the Arab and Islamic world. The choice of Lebanon as the first destination for the export of the revolution resulted from a confluence of regional and intra-Lebanese circumstances. Israel's military invasion of Lebanon in that year, which for the first time brought its forces to an Arab capital, caused the collapse of the central administration in Beirut and created a governmental vacuum. Into it came international military forces from the United States, France, and Italy, whose goal was to facilitate the departure of PLO forces from Lebanon and an Israeli withdrawal from the country.

Iran saw a strategic opportunity to dispatch forces to Syria and Lebanon so as to help them in the war and take an active part in the *jihad* against Israel and the West. The ceasefire that was reached in Lebanon, along with Imam Khomeini's refusal to play an active role in the war on a front that lacked direct and safe supply lines to his forces – at a time when Iran was also engaged in a bloody war with Iraq – led to an Iranian decision to return most of the forces from Lebanon to the front with Iraq. Remaining in Lebanon were about 500 members of the Revolutionary Guards, whose task was to set up a military force for a new Shiite movement that would recognize the principle of *velayat-e faqih* and the religious and political authority of Khomeini.

The Shiite movement Amal, which was founded in 1975 by the Iranian imam Musa Sadr and his Iranian assistant, Dr. Mustafa Chamran, was not prepared to replace its loyalty to the Lebanese state with loyalty to Islamic Iran. Musa Sadr was murdered in Libya in August 1978 with the encouragement of associates of Khomeini, six months before the Islamic Revolution transpired in Iran. And Dr. Mustafa Chamran, who was appointed the Islamic Republic's first defense minister, was killed at the front with Iraq under circumstances not yet fully clarified. During the formative years from February 1979 to June 1982, Amal became a secular Lebanese movement that detached itself

from Iran, regarded Lebanon as a permanent homeland, and refused to recognize the *velayat-e faqih* principle, which demanded recognition of Khomeini's absolute authority. Hence, it was decided in Tehran to set up a new Islamic movement that would be an alternative to Amal and would lead the Islamic Revolution in Lebanon according to the revolutionary precepts of the Islamic Republic.

Khomeini assigned the mission of establishing the new movement to his longtime associate Ali Akhbar Mohtashemi Pur. Considered an expert on the Levant, he arrived in August 1981 to serve as Iran's ambassador in Damascus. One of the first tasks of the new Iranian ambassador was to invite for a meeting the Shiite clerics who recognized the *velayat-e faqih* principle and played key roles in the life of the Shiite community in Baalbek. Those who came to Damascus included Subhi Tofaili, who was the imam of the Imam Ali Mosque and eventually the first secretary-general of Hizbullah (1989-1991); Abbas Musawi, who was head of the *hawza* (Shiite Muslim seminary) named after Imam Almantazer – the most important *madrassa* in Lebanon, to which Lebanese students came who were expelled from Iraq with the Baath Party's rise to power – and served as Hizbullah's second secretary-general (1991-1992); and Mohammed Yazbek, who was the senior instructor at the *madrassa*. This was a seminal meeting in which the Iranian ambassador told the Lebanese clerics of Iran's intention to establish a new Shiite Islamic movement, one that would unite all the pro-Iranian Lebanese elements who until then had operated directly, independently, and without any joint coordination with Tehran.

The new movement was joined by leaders of other organizations that had functioned in Lebanon since the 1970s, such as the Dawa Party, and by others who left Amal and organizations of Shiite clerics such as Tajammu al-Ulama Jabel Amel. The condition that Mohtashemi set for these new members to join was to dissolve or leave the existing frameworks in which they had been active and to set up a new organizational framework led by the Shura Council of Lebanon (Majlis Shura Lubanan), which would include nine Lebanese representatives and be headed by the Iranian ambassador in Damascus. The nine

representatives were invited to Tehran to meet with Khomeini and express their loyalty to him, and said, "We believe in your guidance, your authority, and your leadership. Tell us what we need to do."

Khomeini appointed Ali Khamenei, who was then president of Iran, as his liaison to the new movement in Lebanon, thereby indicating the great importance he assigned to the undertaking there. This meeting laid the cornerstone for the establishment of Hizbullah.

The command staff of the Revolutionary Guards in Lebanon was in charge of building the new movement's organizational and military framework. Their first act was to remove the white flags that the residents of Baalbek and its vicinity had hung on their houses to signal surrender to the Israeli forces, and to replace them with red flags of *jihad* and war. The first two commanders of the Revolutionary Guards, Ahmad Motevasseliyan and his replacement Mansour Koochak Mohseni, served in their posts a short time. The first, on July 5, 1982, a few days after his arrival in Lebanon, was kidnapped on his way from Baalbek to Beirut and executed by the Christian Lebanese Forces, together with the official Iranian representative in Beirut and two escorts. His replacement, a few days after he was appointed, was returned to Iran along with most of the Revolutionary Guards force. In Lebanon, Ahmad Kna'ani remained to command the forces, but he, too, ended his tenure after a short time. Hussein Dehgan was appointed the fourth Revolutionary Guards commander in Lebanon and was responsible for building Hizbullah's training camps in Janata in the Baalbek area. The training lasted about three months, with about 180 taking part in each course. The conditions for acceptance were straightforward: up to age 25 and absolute loyalty to the *velayat-e faqih*.

Abbas Musawi, who was recruited in the first group, recounted:

> When I trained in the first course of the Revolutionary Guards I thought I had come to the true Islam....The school of the Revolutionary Guards is the one that turned Muslim youth into youth who aspire to die a martyr's death and so we were not surprised at all when a Muslim youth in Lebanon...laughed

> at death as he carried a heavy load of explosives. This is the school of the Revolutionary Guards. The art of the Shahada and the art of the conflict with the Israeli enemy exist thanks to the Revolutionary Guards and thanks to the blood of the members of the Revolutionary Guards.

Under Hussein Dehgan's command, a central headquarters was built for the Revolutionary Guards and for the Lebanese volunteers, operating in the Imam Ali Mosque in Baalbek. In September 1983 the Revolutionary Guards seized control of the Sheikh Abdullah base, which was the main base of the Lebanese army in the Baalbek region. Three young clerics – Abbas Musawi, Ahmad Yazbak, and Hassan Nasrallah – marched at the head of a mass procession to the camp and conducted the Friday prayers there. The clerics advised the commander and soldiers of the camp to "be at the disposal of the people and to disobey the orders and instructions given at the White House and in Tel Aviv." The Lebanese commander and his staff were removed from the camp. On its gate its new owners hung a banner on which they proclaimed their objective: "The liberation of the Sheikh Abdullah camp by the Hizbullah masses, a first step toward liberation from Phalange rule." The Sheikh Abdullah camp became the Imam Ali camp and the main headquarters of the Revolutionary Guards and the military force of Hizbullah, and from it the violent operations against the West and Israel proceeded.

The first baptism of fire for Khomeini's supporters in Lebanon involved an attempt to stop the advance of the Israeli army, which was moving toward Beirut in the Khalde area. A group of Shiites, numbering less than 50 fighters, ambushed the Israeli forces. Among the Shiites were also Amal and al-Dawa supporters, and they acted in cooperation with Palestinian organizations. Given their limited ability to hit the Israeli armor hurtling toward the conquest of Beirut, their military achievements were not especially impressive. Nevertheless, the fighters succeeded in capturing an Israeli armored vehicle and transporting it to a victory parade at their base.

The Battle of Khalde is considered the founding myth of the "Islamic resistance," and its fighters were lauded for their heroism. They were led by three men who would soon set up the military and operational force of Hizbullah: Imad Mughniyeh, Mustafa Badreddine, and Ali Deeb, who, for his heroism in the battle, was given the operational nickname Abu Hassan Salameh by Yasser Arafat – after Ali Hassan Salameh of Fatah, a renowned operative who was killed by Israel. Mughniyeh and Badreddine were wounded in the battle, the former lightly and the latter seriously, losing his ability to walk steadily.

The three got to know each other in Fatah training bases during the latter half of the 1970s. Ali Deeb, the military instructor of the other two, had come of age in Fatah. The commander of the camp who received Imad Mughniyeh was Anis Nakash, who was recruited by Iranian intelligence and sent to Paris in 1980 to assassinate Shapour Bakhtiar, the last prime minister of Iran under the shah. When the Islamic Revolution broke out a few months earlier, Nakash introduced Mughniyeh to representatives of Iranian intelligence in Beirut. In the new Islamic embassy, Mohamed Salah Husseini, an Iraqi of Iranian origin who was the liaison between Khomeini and Arafat and knew Mughniyeh well, was appointed the envoy of the Revolutionary Guards in Beirut.

The mother of Imad Mughniyeh, who was born in 1962, prayed that her son would be a man of religion and would learn in the prestigious *madrassas* of Najaf. He took Fiqh (jurisprudence) lessons already at the age of 10, and in his youth spent much time in the mosque of Mohammad Hussein Fadlallah.

Imad Mughniyeh, however, saw his mission as the armed struggle against Israel. In 1980 Fadlallah survived an assassination attempt. Envoys of Iraqi intelligence tried to kill him because of his involvement in the Iraqi Dawa Party's subversion against the Saddam Hussein regime. Subsequently Mughniyeh set up, together with a small group that he formed, a security unit to safeguard him, and indeed he would

become the central spiritual figure of Shiite radicalism in Lebanon and the author of a concept of the use of force in Shiite Islam.

In 1980 Mughniyeh accompanied Fadlallah and a delegation of Lebanese clerics on a first visit to revolutionary Iran. He became an integral part of the operational branch of the Iranian embassy in Beirut.

When the first commander of the Revolutionary Guards was kidnapped in Lebanon in July 1982, it was Imad Mughniyeh who brought the bad news to the Iranian embassy in Beirut. A short time later Mughniyeh proposed to his replacement in Baalbek, Mansour Koochak Mohseni, to kidnap the president of the American University in Beirut, David Dodge, as a bargaining chip for the kidnapped Iranians (it was not yet known that they had been killed). David Dodge was kidnapped by Mughniyeh and brought to Baalbek, and from there transferred to Damascus and to Tehran. This was the first kidnapping, but not the last, that Mughniyeh carried out in the service of Iran.

The First Suicide Operation Against Israel in Lebanon

On November 11, 1982, at 7:20 a.m., a huge explosion struck the headquarters of the Israeli military governor in Tyre. The building collapsed upon its occupants. Seventy-six soldiers and members of the General Security Service were killed as well as 15 Lebanese who were in the building. A military investigatory commission headed by Gen. Meir Zorea found that the disaster was caused by an explosion of gas canisters in the building. Yet the facts were otherwise. A white Peugeot 504 driven by a suicide bomber, Ahmad Qassir, broke through the gate of the camp and blew it up. This marked the first time a suicide operation was carried out in Lebanon. It was planned in minute detail by Imad Mughniyeh. He recruited the bomber and used the car of his friend Ali Deeb, in which a large quantity of explosives was hidden. The explosives were provided by Fatah. Before the PLO forces left Beirut in September 1982, Khalil al-Wazir (Abu Jihad) ordered that some of their weapons supplies and explosives be transferred to

Mughniyeh, whom he knew from the days when Mughniyeh trained in Fatah. According to Mughniyeh's official biography, he joined the elite unit known as Force 17 while Abu Jihad was head of Fatah's military wing. Abu Jihad, like Arafat, gave preferential treatment to the young Shiite who showed such devotion to *jihad* against Israel and the West.

Imad Mughniyeh did not know Ahmad Qassir. A family member of the suicide bomber put them in touch with each other. There was a need for legal permission to carry out the operation. It could not be executed without a *fatwa* from a supreme religious authority, as Ayatollah Hassan Tarad later recounted:

> Lebanon was liberated through acts of self-sacrifice [*istishad*] only. And the only one who gave his blessing to them was Imam Khomeini....He sent me a letter in which he wrote that he was the *muqallid* [emulator] of Imam Khomeini, he had made a decision to perform *istishhad* and to attack the enemy. And I answered him [positively] on the basis of the ruling of his *Marja' Taqlid* [religious authority], Imam Khomeini.

For several days Mughniyeh observed the Israeli headquarters and studied its routines, how its guarding schedule was run, and, particularly, at which hours the largest number of soldiers was in the camp. During the two days before the operation, in her country house in Teir Daba near Tyre, Mughniyeh's mother hosted her son and Ahmad Qassir, feeding and lodging them. A day before the operation, Mughniyeh ordered his mother and the other family members to leave the village and go to their home in Beirut. Mughniyeh and Qassir went on their way. The former closely monitored the successful performance of the operation. The identity of Ahmad Qassir was concealed for two and a half years to avoid harm to his family. His mother thought he had gone to Beirut and disappeared there.

When his identity was made public, Ahmad Qassir became a hero in Lebanon and in Iran. In its official bulletin *al-Ahed*, Hizbullah published huge pictures of the young Shiite in which his image arose from the ruins of the Israeli military headquarters. At the home of

Qassir's family in Dir Qanon al-Nahar, a remote village in southern Lebanon, a certificate of honor arrived from the commander of the Islamic *ummah*. The certificate bore a portrait of Imam Khomeini and the symbol of the Islamic Republic, with praise for their son's deed. In Tehran a monument was inaugurated to this hero of Islam, with his portrait etched on it and descriptions of his glory in Arabic and Farsi. Mohtashemi Pur and Hizbullah's representative in Tehran unveiled it. Later the Qassir family was accorded honor and glory in Hizbullah as well. The brother of the "first *shahid*," Muhammad Jafar Qassir, rose high in the Hizbullah command hierarchy and was in charge of the deliveries of Iranian weapons from Syria to Lebanon. Another brother, Hassan Qassir, married Hassan Nasrallah's daughter and was one of the close intermediaries to the Revolutionary Guards leadership.

Imad Mughniyeh himself won glory in Tehran. He had shown impressive operational ability while managing to maintain total anonymity. Up to the Israeli withdrawal from Lebanon in 2000, Hizbullah carried out 12 suicide operations against Israeli targets in Lebanon. The videos of the suicide bombers reading their wills before going on their missions were sent to Tehran. Imam Khomeini requested to see them; he watched every one of them and was deeply affected. Throughout its lengthy stay in Lebanon, Israel did not succeed to thwart operations of that kind.

Imad Mughniyeh's success in Tyre led him to plan and implement suicide bombings in Beirut, the most severe of which struck the American embassy in April 1983 and the Beirut headquarters of the U.S. marines and of the French paratrooper force in October 1983. Mughniyeh acted in total secrecy. He set up an operational unit that used the name Islamic Jihad. It operated outside the organizational framework of Hizbullah and in direct coordination with the intelligence and operational organizations of the Revolutionary Guards. Hussein Dehgan, the Revolutionary Guards commander in Lebanon, became aware of Mughniyeh's operational capabilities when he kidnapped David Dodge. The Iranian commander took Mughniyeh under his wing. On October 24, 1983, two suicide bombers were sent on the

last missions of their lives. The U.S. and French headquarters were blown up within a short time of each other. The order to blow up the headquarters arrived from Tehran. When the international forces left Beirut in defeat, Mughniyeh was received as a hero in Tehran.

In 1985 Israel withdrew to the security zone in southern Lebanon. Abbas Musawi was appointed military commander of the Islamic resistance in the south. Hizbullah's struggle to drive Israel out of Lebanon intensified, and Hizbullah's military force improved. New military frameworks were built, and Hizbullah fighters were trained in Iran where they learned methods of combat and use of weapons. Hizbullah commanders and fighters participated in warfare at the front with Iraq, with special emphasis on conquering fortified targets.

Hizbullah identified a vulnerability in the protection of the forward positions of the South Lebanese Army, which was commanded by Antoine Lahad. Most of the SLA soldiers were Shiites, some with relatives in Hizbullah. The large majority of the commanders were Christians. This was a problematic ethnic composition in a multiethnic society in which a military force was contending with guerrilla warfare.

Hizbullah assigned special importance to psychological warfare and the battle over perception. The camera took its place beside the rifle. A special War Media Unit was set up, whose role was to film military successes, particularly if the Hizbullah flag was raised on a position that had been conquered even for a moment. The SLA positions were the first to absorb fire. The goal was to destroy the forward line of SLA positions and bring about the desertion of the Shiite soldiers, whose main motivation was monetary payment. Hizbullah also sought to disrupt the movement of the Israeli forces in the security zone, where most of the struggle was waged. Hizbullah did not make a target out of the communities on the Israeli side of the border. Unlike the struggle of the Palestinian organizations, Hizbullah's strategic objective in those years was to oust the Israeli army from Lebanon.

The Killing of Hizbullah Leader Abbas Musawi and Its Aftermath

On February 16, 1992, Israel assassinated Hizbullah leader Abbas Musawi as he was visiting the town of Jibchit where an annual memorial was being held for Ragheb Harb, a Shiite imam who led the struggle against Israel in southern Lebanon. The move was ill-considered. Behind it stood the head of Military Intelligence, Gen. Uri Sagi, and Chief of Staff Lt.-Gen. Ehud Barak. The decision was made against recommendations by those responsible for intelligence assessment and without having pondered all the implications. The recommendation from the assessment of intelligence was to monitor Musawi's visit and collect intelligence that would make it possible to kidnap him when he came to the memorial ceremony the following year, and then trade him for air force navigator Ron Arad, who was held captive by Hizbullah and transferred to the Revolutionary Guards.

Hizbullah's response was lethal and it crossed two red lines. That same day the group launched dozens of rockets into Israeli territory all along the border area from Kiryat Shmona to Nahariya. It was the first time Hizbullah had fired rockets into Israel; up until then it had taken care to fire them only into the security zone. On March 17, 1992, a car driven by a Lebanese Shiite suicide bomber exploded at the Israeli embassy in Buenos Aires. This marked the first time Hizbullah had attacked an Israeli target outside of Israel. The operation was planned and executed by Imad Mughniyeh and Iranian intelligence.

More than two years later, on the night of June 2, 1994, the Israeli air force attacked a Hizbullah training camp in Ain Dardara near Baalbek while about 150 Hizbullah recruits were sleeping. It was a severe blow. More than 40 Hizbullah members were killed, the highest number of Hizbullah casualties in a single Israeli operation. Six weeks later, on July 13, 1994, came the revenge. It, too, was outside of Lebanon and again in Buenos Aires. This time as well, behind the planning and execution stood Imad Mughniyeh, with assistance from the Iranian intelligence branch in Argentina. In both operations Hizbullah made clear that a heavy blow against it would lead to a revenge strike that

would breach the rules of the conflict in Lebanon. Argentina was chosen because of the operational infrastructure that Mughniyeh had built there with the help of Iranian intelligence, which made use of a pro-Hizbullah Lebanese Shiite population.

In the wake of Hizbullah's rocket fire into Israeli territory and its repeated violations of the understandings reached between the sides, on April 11, 1996, Israel launched a large-scale campaign in Lebanon known as Operation Grapes of Wrath. It included devastating strikes on infrastructures of the Lebanese state and very heavy use of firepower, including airstrikes on Hizbullah targets in Beirut. An operational foul-up brought about a mistake on Israel's part. A barrage, intended to enable the rescue of an Israeli force that had been attacked, instead fell beside a UN compound in which Lebanese civilians had taken refuge. Hizbullah reported inflated figures of 102 civilians, including women and children, killed and 100 wounded, including four UN soldiers. After the United States and Syria drafted a document of understandings stipulating that Israel and Hizbullah would not attack, with missiles or any other weapons, civilians on either side, Israel ended the campaign.

The military commander of Hizbullah was Mustafa Badreddine, who had been appointed to the post a year earlier. He was praised by Hassan Nasrallah for his stewardship of what Hizbullah called the April 1996 War. Eventually Nasrallah would claim that, at the beginning of the operation, the Israeli air force had attacked Hizbullah headquarters in Dahieh with the aim of hitting Badreddine. A missile fired from one of the planes struck a room next to the room in which Hizbullah's military commander was staying; Badreddine survived. In Hizbullah's narrative, the April 1996 War was a great success. As the organization saw it, the understandings reached at its conclusion were the key to Israel's withdrawal from Lebanon four years later.

Hizbullah Ambushes Israeli Naval Commandos

On the night of September 5, 1997, a special Hizbullah force ambushed an Israeli naval commando force from Shayetet 13 that had landed near the village of Ansariya to plant explosive devices that would kill an operative of Hizbullah. Eleven IDF fighters, including the force's commander, Lt.-Col. Yossi Korkin, were killed. In Israel several investigatory commissions were formed to uncover the reason for the failure. The first commission, headed by Gen. Gabi Ophir, concluded that the Israeli force had encountered a chance ambush by Hizbullah that caused the explosive devices some of the Israeli fighters carried on their backs to detonate. The commission's conclusions emphasized the incidental nature of the ambush. No one believed that Hizbullah had had prior information on the arrival of the Israeli elite force.

In September 1998, as he marked a year since the Ansariya operation, Hassan Nasrallah hinted that Hizbullah did have prior intelligence information about the Israeli force's arrival, but refused to reveal what it was. This was part of the psychological warfare that Hizbullah waged, which was planned and refined by Mustafa Badreddine. It was one of Hizbullah's important operations. Nasrallah personally met the fighters who returned from the incident and gave each of them a volume of the Koran.

In August 2010 Nasrallah disclosed the intelligence information. This was about five years after the assassination of Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri, which Hizbullah was accused of perpetrating. Nasrallah denied this entirely and accused Israel of the murder instead. To buttress his claim, he elaborated on intelligence information, including with regard to Israel's technological capabilities, that Hizbullah and the Lebanese intelligence services had gathered on Israel's clandestine activity in Lebanon.

Nasrallah revealed that Hizbullah had managed to intercept transmissions of aerial photographs, taken by Israeli drones, of a number of targets in southern Lebanon near Ansariya. He said the

pictures were transmitted directly to an operations center in Israel and were not encoded, as Israeli intelligence had thought. The Iranians provided Hizbullah with the appropriate equipment, and it was used by Hizbullah members who had studied in technical schools and institutes in Lebanon. Foremost among them was Hassan Laqqis, a close friend of Nasrallah who oversaw Hizbullah's technological development. The transmissions were received by Hizbullah in real time and deciphered. They indicated the destination that Israel planned to reach. Mustafa Badreddine deployed his forces in ambushes for several weeks because the date of the operation was unknown. The ambush was an important operational achievement. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu called it at the time, "one of the worst tragedies that has ever befallen us. We lost some of our best soldiers. There have been some tragedies in the past, but I have never seen this type of tragedy."

Israel-Syria Peace Talks in the 1990s

In the mid-1990s Hizbullah monitored with concern the political developments related to the peace process, at first between Israel and the Palestinians in the wake of the Oslo accords and subsequently the negotiations between Israel and Syria. The feeling in Lebanon was that the United States had managed to create a real thaw between the sides, because of which Israel would withdraw from the Golan Heights in return for a peace treaty with Syria that would include aspects of normalization. Hizbullah feared that an agreement between Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin and Syrian President Hafez Assad had already been reached. Nasrallah said Hizbullah had held internal discussions in which some had even questioned the use of the name Hizbullah for the movement, suggesting the possibility of adopting a new name that would better fit the new reality. Furthermore, some of Hizbullah's senior officials, most of all Imad Mughniyeh, were on the United States' blacklist, and in the organization's top echelon the question arose as to whether they should leave Lebanon for Iran.

In October 1995 the Hizbullah leadership went to meet the leader of Iran, Khamenei, in Tehran to ask his opinion. "He was very patient with us," said Nasrallah. "We raised many issues and the members of the leadership made different suggestions; Khamenei listened to all of it." All of the senior Iranian officials who took part in the meeting, without exception, thought the Israeli-Syrian talks would end in a treaty. Khamenei then said, "It is good that you take into account worst-case scenarios that you must continue to resist, redoubling your efforts and bolstering your weapons, facilities, and human resources. Don't worry because there will be no peace treaty between Syria and Israel."

All those present at the meeting noted that Nasrallah, the other Lebanese, and the Iranians were astonished by Ayatollah Khamenei's unequivocal statements. Khamenei summed up by saying, "Forget it and put it away. Continue to do what you were doing in a better and stronger way than before."

Nasrallah, like the rest of the Hizbullah leadership, was surprised by the Iranian leader's decisiveness. They returned to Lebanon and continue to act in accordance with Khamenei's instructions. Two weeks after the visit to Tehran, Yitzhak Rabin was assassinated in Tel Aviv.

The Impact on Hizbullah of the Rise of Iran's Qasem Soleimani

In 1998 Khamenei appointed Qasem Soleimani commander of the Quds Force of the Revolutionary Guards. He replaced Ahmad Vahidi, who had played a key role in planning the bombing of the AMIA building in Buenos Aires together with Imad Mughniyeh, and was appointed deputy defense minister and then defense minister of Iran. Soleimani came to Lebanon from the front with Iraq to meet Hassan Nasrallah for the first time; the two had not known each other previously. One of the first decisions they made was to combine the two roles, that of the security commander and that of the military commander, which Mughniyeh and Mustafa Badreddine had held separately with each

of them directly subordinate to Nasrallah, into a single position that was called "jihad assistant of Hassan Nasrallah." This position was given to Mughniyeh, who thereby became the commander of all of Hizbullah's military and security affairs.

In that first meeting between Nasrallah and Soleimani, Mughniyeh, Badreddine and other commanders took part as well, and Nasrallah attested to the emergence of "spiritual harmony as if we had known each other already for decades." Soleimani made Lebanon a secondary headquarters, and he would regularly come to Beirut every two or three weeks and stay there for days. Sometimes he would go to southern Lebanon to meet with the fighters at the front. Some in Hizbullah feared for his safety and tried to convince him not to go near the Israeli border, but he insisted. The relations between the Iranian commander and Nasrallah and his staff went beyond work relations and turned into personal friendship, particularly with Mughniyeh; Soleimani was hosted at his home and got to know his family well. This strongly influenced the extent of the aid that Hizbullah began to receive from Iran. From 1985 to 1998, the year in which Soleimani was appointed to command the Quds Force, the ties between Hizbullah and Iran developed slowly, in line with military capabilities and Hizbullah's limited manpower for military missions. When Soleimani and Mughniyeh were chosen for their posts in 1998, the doors opened wide and increased military assistance began to flow from Iran to Hizbullah, also greatly improving the training capability of Hizbullah's special units.

Israel Withdraws from Southern Lebanon in 2000

At the end of 1999, Hassan Nasrallah – accompanied for the first time by 50 of Hizbullah's field commanders, headed by Imad Mughniyeh – went to meet with Khamenei and the top Iranian leadership. "At that time we did not think that Israel would withdraw from Lebanon in 2000," Nasrallah attested. "We were not sure, and we assumed it was not likely that Israel would withdraw in 2000 without setting

preconditions." Hizbullah's assessment was that Israel would not retreat under military pressure, fearing that this would have a strategic significance beyond the Lebanese arena that would lead to the emergence of a new regional reality. Nasrallah presented this reasoning to Khamenei and said Hizbullah would need more time for additional operations that would bring about an Israeli withdrawal without preconditions. Khamenei, Nasrallah noted, bore down and asked why Hizbullah held that view. After lengthy explanations by Nasrallah and his comrades for why Israel would not withdraw, among other things so as not to create a precedent regarding the Palestinians of withdrawing under fire outside the framework of negotiations, Khamenei recommended that his guests seriously reconsider their stance. He demanded that they continue the military activity and plan for the future in such a way that Israel would withdraw from Lebanon, while taking military, public-advocacy, and diplomatic measures. "We were surprised to hear these words," Nasrallah remarked. "Because we all believed that Ehud Barak, who had now won the elections, would not fulfill his promise to withdraw because the conditions he had supposedly set, for Lebanon and for Hizbullah, had not been met. It appeared to us not smart and not logical."

After the official meeting, the Hizbullah delegation was invited to Khamenei's house for the evening. Nasrallah, Mughniyeh, and the field commanders stationed at the front with Israel, wearing uniforms and keffiyehs, looking like Iranian fighters at the front, entered a large hall in which prayers were conducted with Khamenei presiding. When the prayers concluded, he turned to bless the guests. He asked his escorts to move aside and turned to Nasrallah: "I am here to listen to you." At that moment one of the Hizbullah commanders drew close to Khamenei and kissed his hand. The emotion was great and profound, and some of the tough field commanders began to cry; others did not manage to stay on their feet. Slowly they approached Khamenei; one kissed his hand, and when he bent to kiss Khamenei's feet, the leader of Iran did not let him. He drew back and asked Nasrallah to seat them and calm them down so that a conversation could be held with them. Khamenei made statements in Persian, and Nasrallah translated them

into Arabic. "You will win, the victory is closer than people think." Because Nasrallah had said it was unlikely that Israel would withdraw under these circumstances, he pointed to him and added, "Every one of you will see the victory with his own eyes and you will win."

In May 2000 Israel withdrew from Lebanon to the international border, without conditions. This was the first time Israel had withdrawn from Arab territory under fire and without a ceasefire agreement or any diplomatic arrangement. Hassan Nasrallah became a national hero in Lebanon and in the Arab and Islamic world. He was perceived as the successor of Abdul Nasser and Saladin. In Tehran, Nasrallah was received as the hero of Islam. The imam smiled upon him. All of the Hizbullah military commanders, headed by Imad Mughniyeh, who accompanied Nasrallah at the beginning of 2000, became a symbol of Islam's victory over Israel.

The withdrawal of the Israeli forces took only a short time. It was preceded by the evacuation of the forward positions held by the SLA, which Hizbullah had shelled with the goal of fracturing the SLA's ethnic framework. Imad Mughniyeh did his work in the operations room that had been set up beside one of the Shiite villages, personally commanding the Hizbullah forces that took over the abandoned positions. Mughniyeh's strategic plan was based on the desire to prevent harm to the Lebanese population during the retreat of the Israeli and SLA forces. The southern commander, Nabil Qaouk, directed the Shiite population to go southward and return to the villages where they were born, while also ensuring that the lives and property of the Christian residents of the areas that had been liberated, as well as the families of SLA members that had remained, were not harmed. Hizbullah fighters were commanded to refrain from acts of revenge and plunder. Hizbullah thought it important to restore normal civilian life as quickly as possible.

The images that Hizbullah's propaganda outlets transmitted showed the flight of the Israeli forces and the convoys of families of SLA

members who crowded together beside the border fence and asked to enter Israel. Hizbullah flags were displayed all over southern Lebanon.

Although Israel withdrew to the international border, Hizbullah did not recognize the new line because Israel retained the Shebaa Farms area, which had been under Syrian sovereignty. The area remained in dispute between Hizbullah and Israel and served as a pretext to continue the *jihad* against Israel. Several months after the Israeli withdrawal, Nasrallah went to meet with Khamenei in Tehran. The Iranian leaders were very delighted at the victory, Nasrallah noted. "We talked about the future and Khamenei told me that Israel had 25 years left in which to exist." Nasrallah took these words very seriously and tried to explain the ludicrous rationale behind them.

In October 2000 Hizbullah kidnapped three Israeli soldiers who had been patrolling the security fence along the Lebanese border. Nasrallah waited for an Israeli response that was not long in coming, but he was soon surprised by its feebleness. As he saw it, the Israeli response bore no relation to the truculent threats and warnings its leaders had voiced before and after the withdrawal. Nasrallah was reinforced in his belief that Israeli society was made out of spiderwebs and that its leaders were in a state of shock over Lebanon, making them incapable of activating Israeli forces for fear of sinking into the Lebanese mud.

Nasrallah listened in amazement to voices in Israel saying, "Restraint is strength." And he rubbed his eyes in wonder at the sight of Israeli soldiers getting pelted with stones hurled across the fence and taking shelter in special cages designed to protect them.

Iran's Strategy in Lebanon

Ali Khamenei gave an order to bolster Iranian involvement in Lebanon. He allowed Hizbullah to join the Lebanese parliament in 1992, and Hizbullah joined the new Lebanese government, formed after the Syrian forces' departure from Lebanon in the wake of the Hariri

assassination in 2005. Hizbullah sent two ministers to serve in the new government, primarily to safeguard its military force. It remained the only party in Lebanon that had its own army. Hizbullah exploited the political rules of the game to seize control of the Lebanese state institutions, and Lebanon turned into a failed state. Iran replaced Syria as the arbiter of Lebanon's fate. All of Nasrallah's declarations that Hizbullah was "a Lebanese party that makes its decisions independently and the Iranian ambassador in Beirut reads about them in the newspaper" failed to pass the test of reality. Nasrallah, who was appointed the representative in Lebanon of the Marja' Taqlid or source of authority, namely, Khamenei, did what Iran ordered him to do. All the foolish words about Hizbullah's Lebanese nationalism were exposed as hollow by the strategy that Iran built in Lebanon, which was based on three main sets of factors:

The first set: The turning of Lebanon into an Iranian forward position against Israel, including an array of short- and long-range missiles that would create a balance of deterrence with Israel and prevent it from attacking the Iranian nuclear program. Iran explicitly threatened that any attack on its nuclear facilities by the United States and/or Israel would prompt immediate missile fire on Israel. Qasem Soleimani played a key role in building Hizbullah's new missile arsenal. He installed long-range Zilzal-2 missiles in Lebanon that, with their range of 250 kilometers, can hit deep within Israel. With Iranian assistance, Mughniyeh also built a dug-in, dense array of defense systems based on a network of tunnels and trenches that was designed to allow Hizbullah to operate underground. Above it were built intricate "nature reserves" full of barriers to prevent the free movement of Israeli forces.

The second set: The building of an Islamic society in Lebanon in the image of Iran whose fealty is to Imam Khamenei. From the line of outposts northward to the suburbs of Beirut, Hizbullah constructed, with Iran's help, the state of Hizbullahstan: a ramified network of welfare, cultural, educational, and religious institutions buttressed by a supportive economic, medical, and social network.

The third set: Active involvement in the Palestinian *jihad* against Israel. Iran became the main source of military assistance to the Palestinian struggle. Imad Mughniyeh renewed his ties with Yasser Arafat and his military commanders while also building up the military force of Palestinian Islamic Jihad in the Gaza Strip.

The Second Lebanon War of 2006

On July 12, 2006, Hizbullah carried out a second successful kidnapping, this time capturing two Israeli soldiers. Mughniyeh personally planned and commanded the operation. Nasrallah expected an Israeli response similar to that of October 2000. This time, however, the Israeli response was of a different magnitude. In the first half hour of the war that Israel launched, its air force planes destroyed Hizbullah's long-range missile stockpiles and removed its ability to strike deep within Israel. Hizbullah retained medium- and short-range missiles, which it fired at the Israeli home front. For the first time, targets were hit in Haifa and other cities in northern Israel. Hizbullah aimed missiles at strategic targets in Haifa Bay. They missed, but took a toll in life and property in other places. Israel reacted with great force and destroyed Hizbullah's headquarters in Dahieh, its social institutions, and the home and offices of the Lebanese Ayatollah Mohammad Hussein Fadlallah, a close associate of the leader of Hizbullah.

Nasrallah was surprised; he stated, with rare regret, "If I had known what the Israeli response would be I would not have kidnapped the two soldiers." He was encouraged by the fact that the Iranian leader stuck by him. On the first day of the war, Khamenei announced his support for Hizbullah and emphasized the need to resist and fight Israel. Nasrallah rejected the conditions that Israel posed for a ceasefire: the freeing of the two kidnapped soldiers, Hizbullah's disarmament and transformation into a political party alone, and the deployment of an international force on the border with Israel.

A painting of Imad Mughniyeh (left), briefing Hassan Nasrallah and Qasem Soleimani with a map showing military maneuvers from the 2006 Second Lebanon War.

Qasem Soleimani came to Lebanon to help manage the war. Because Beirut and the means of access to it were under bombardment and Israel had destroyed bridges and roads leading to the Lebanese capital, Nasrallah tried to convince him to remain in Damascus. Imad Mughniyeh went to Damascus and brought the Quds Force

commander to Dahieh. During the war Soleimani stayed in close proximity to Nasrallah and Mughniyeh. The three conducted the war from a joint operations room whose location Israel did not manage to discover. Soleimani's presence, Nasrallah recounted, played a supportive, morale-boosting spiritual and psychological role.

During the first week of the battles Soleimani left Beirut to meet with Khamenei in Iran. The imam convened all of the top Iranian leadership for a consultation in Mashhad, which was attended by past and present defense ministers as well as all of the past and present Revolutionary Guards commanders. Soleimani gave a firsthand account of the course of the war: "My report was a sad, bitter one," he said, and emphasized that his assessment did not reflect any hope for a Hizbullah victory. "The war was different; it was a technological and precision war. The targets were chosen with precision and the objective was to attack not only Hizbullah but also the whole Shiite community," Soleimani commented. After him Khamenei spoke. He said Soleimani's report was true and the war was indeed difficult, and compared it to the Battle of the Trench (Kandaq), also known as the Battle of the Confederates (627 CE). He described the situation of the Muslims and the Prophet's band in the battle, as well as the spirit of the fighters, and concluded by saying he believed that the victory in this war in Lebanon would be like the victory in the Battle of the Trench, which was a great one for the Prophet Muhammad.

"I was daunted," Soleimani acknowledged. Khamenei's words did not jibe with the military situation on the ground, and Soleimani was worried. Khamenei drafted a letter to Nasrallah, and Soleimani was asked to bring it to Beirut. In this letter the leader of Iran detailed how he viewed the war and, more important, its outcomes. Khamenei's message included an Iranian justification for the kidnapping of the two Israeli soldiers, and this was very important for Nasrallah who was under harsh criticism for it. Khamenei described the kidnapping as "a hidden divine blessing" because it prevented a surprise attack on Hizbullah. Khamenei had expected the war to be very vexing, frustrating, and threatening to Hizbullah's existence. Yet he demanded

patience from Nasrallah because, by the war's end, "you will be victorious and you will become a regional power to the point that no other power will be able to confront you."

Nasrallah was skeptical. He did not believe he would survive this war. He told Soleimani that surviving it would be his great achievement. In the course of the war, Nasrallah, Mughniyeh, and Soleimani went from place to place in fear of an Israeli strike. Nasrallah removed his robe and turban and went about in a track suit. Yet, in Hizbullah's terminology, the Second Lebanon War was *naser ilahi kabir* – a great divine victory. It was fraught with "divine intervention," with miracles and wonders, and Shiite imams and angels played an active part in it, supporting the *jihad* fighters and vanquishing the enemy. A widespread legend told of a Hizbullah fighter at Bint Jbeil who fired missiles at the enemy and, when the allotment of missiles ran out, left the place and hid. However, he and his commanders were surprised to discover that the missile launcher marvelously continued to launch missiles by itself for a long time and to strike the enemy. After 33 days of fighting, a ceasefire was announced. Nasrallah declared a divine victory; he survived the war. In Israel a state investigatory commission was established to examine the course of the war, and the feeling among the public was that the military and the leadership had failed. A finger of blame was pointed at Prime Minister Ehud Olmert, Defense Minister Amir Peretz, and Chief of Staff Dan Halutz. All three were new to their positions when the war erupted.

Hizbullah Chief of Staff Imad Mughniyeh, now regarded as the commander of both victories – the 2000 withdrawal and the 2006 war – did not rest on his laurels. A short time after the war ended, he set up some teams to analyze the development of the war, draw military lessons, and prepare for the next war. The main conclusions reached by the teams for drawing lessons focused on the need to exploit what Hizbullah perceived as the Israeli weak point, namely, the civilian front. This required renewing and strengthening the missile arsenal so as to strike strategic targets deep within Israel and fracture Israeli society from within. In light of this, along with the understanding that

Hizbullah's ground forces had operated satisfactorily, it was decided to form additional elite units, equipped with advanced weapons, which would have both defensive and offensive capabilities. Thus the special force was established that eventually was called Radwan (Mughniyeh's operational *nom de guerre*). It was built from elite units and numbered about 5,000 carefully chosen fighters who were sent for commando training in Iran.

Qasem Soleimani, who spent the entire duration of the war in Lebanon and reported on a daily basis to Khamenei, won approbation in Iran for his role in Hizbullah's "divine victory." He was now in charge of renewing Hizbullah's missile supply, including filling the storerooms with long-range missiles. He saw an urgent need to surround Israel from the north and south with missile batteries that would enable Hizbullah and the Palestinian organizations in Gaza, particularly Palestinian Islamic Jihad, to strike the Israeli home front. From Soleimani's military perspective, the Second Lebanon War had altered the Israeli strategy that David Ben-Gurion had established at the country's inception, which was based on preemptive offense and on attacking and waging the war in the enemy's territory. Now, in his view, that had been changed to a defensive strategy.

Imad Mughniyeh's Assassination

In February 2008 Hizbullah was dealt a severe blow. In a joint operation that was attributed to Israel and the United States, Imad Mughniyeh was killed in Damascus. He was in the midst of the process of drawing lessons from the Second Lebanon War. Minutes before he was killed, he parted from Soleimani, together with whom he had met with Ramadan Abdullah Shalah, leader of Palestinian Islamic Jihad, and planned the continuing armed struggle against Israel from the Gaza Strip. No actor took responsibility for the assassination. However, senior intelligence and espionage officials, as well as fame-hungry politicians in Israel, briefed familiar journalists on very secret operational details. Everyone wanted his moment of glory.

The Mughniyeh assassination told Nasrallah that he needed to immediately change his modus operandi, hide, and set up shop in a bunker from which he threatened in televised speeches to get revenge on Israel in whatever way possible. The blow was indeed very severe to Nasrallah personally, who had known Mughniyeh since before 1982, and to Hizbullah as an organization, which most probably has not recovered. Upon his death, Imad Mughniyeh became a symbol of Shiite heroism and was compared to military commanders who had fought alongside the Prophet Muhammad, to Imam Ali, and to his son Imam Hussein. The personality cult that sprang up around his figure was fraught with terminology and images of holiness and heroism. Since the assassination, no one of comparable profile and abilities has arisen to replace Imad Mughniyeh.

Into his large shoes stepped his brother-in-law, Mustafa Badreddine. The two had worked together before Hizbullah was founded, and they had jointly created Hizbullah's military and operational nucleus. Throughout their adult lives they had divided operational and military roles between them. When Badreddine was arrested after a failed operation in Kuwait in 1983, Mughniyeh worked to free him from prison by carrying out terror operations in and outside of Lebanon. In the summer of 1990, when Saddam Hussein's army invaded Kuwait, Badreddine escaped from prison to Tehran and from there returned to Lebanon to take his place beside Mughniyeh.

Hizbullah Intervenes in the Syrian Civil War

Hizbullah's operational apparatus abroad managed to carry out a few attacks against Israeli targets outside of Israel (in Thailand, India, and Bulgaria), but they were not of Mughniyeh's operational magnitude. Mustafa Badreddine himself was assassinated in May 2016 near the airport in Damascus when he was commander of Hizbullah forces in Syria, at the height of the war against the rebellion there. Hassan Nasrallah accused Sunni rebels of the assassination, but the circumstances of Badreddine's death remain unclear to this

day. The then Israeli chief of staff, Lt.-Gen. Gadi Eizenkot, turned an accusing finger in a surprising direction. He affirmed reports that said Badreddine was assassinated by Soleimani with the approval of Nasrallah. Similar reports claimed that the trigger of the weapon that killed Badreddine was pulled by Ibrahim Hussein Jizani ("Nabil"), who was head of Nasrallah's personal security detail and in charge of assassinations of opponents of Iran and Hizbullah. Amid the accusations against Soleimani, other reports said the commander of the Hizbullah forces in Syria had refused to comply with the orders of the commander of the Iranian Quds Force. Soleimani demanded an increase in the number of Hizbullah fighters in Syria. This, along with the patronizing treatment of the Hizbullah fighters by the Iranian commanders, who were not always in the battlefield, sparked resentment in Hizbullah. The Lebanese fighters felt that they were cannon fodder, thrown into battle to achieve Iran's objectives. Hizbullah's heavy losses in Syria, which reached a peak (during 2013-2019) of about 2,000 dead, including commanders from the group's founding generation, and about 8,000 wounded, provoked anger among the Shiite community, which was further inflamed by the leading opponent of Hizbullah, Subhi Tofaili, who was its first secretary-general and was expelled from it in 1991. Tofaili, one of Hizbullah's founders, ruled that whoever was killed in Syria was not considered a *shahid* because he had not fought and been killed in the *jihad* against Israel. He also ruled that the fighting against Muslims in Syria was a violation of *sharia* law.

Nasrallah justified Hizbullah's intervention in the rebellion in Syria – first, in light of the need to protect Shiite holy places in the Damascus area, and later, because of the need to protect Shiites living near the Syrian-Lebanese border and prevent the transport of suicide vehicles that Sunni *jihadists* had smuggled into Beirut. At the apex of the war, Nasrallah emphasized the importance of Hizbullah's role in the Iranian-led resistance axis and the need to support Assad and maintain his rule.

Hizbullah joined the fray in Syria in 2013, about two years after the outbreak of the revolt against Bashar Assad. This was not a decision of the Hizbullah leadership; the decision was made in Tehran. Iran aligned itself with Assad and dispatched forces to salvage his regime. Gen. Hossein Hamdani, who was commander of the Revolutionary Guards in Tehran, was sent by Qasem Soleimani in January 2012 to command the Iranian forces in Syria. He had gained previous experience with a war against a rebelling population in Kurdistan during the Iran-Iraq War, taken part in the repression of the 1999 student protests in Iran, and trained forces for the quashing of protests while he was instructing the Congolese army and endearing himself to Gen. Kabila. At Soleimani's behest, Hamdani went to meet with Nasrallah in Beirut, Khamenei having appointed Nasrallah to lead the resistance axis in the war in Syria. In his memoirs, Hamdani described how he presented Nasrallah with the strategic plan to salvage the Assad regime. Nasrallah requested time to study the plan and provide comments on it. After a week Hamdani returned to Beirut to hear Nasrallah's comments. He approved the plan. Apparently it included the incorporation of Hizbullah forces under the command of Mustafa Badreddine in the Quds Force commander's strategic plan to establish a Shiite foreign legion numbering some 100,000 fighters, who would be brought to Syria from Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Iraq.

During the years of the war in Syria, Hizbullah gained great battle experience and knowledge about warfare in built-up areas, the conquest of objectives, and the deployment and command of large military frameworks, with which it had not had much prior experience. There is no doubt that the years of the campaign in Syria, despite the heavy casualties, had a formative effect on Hizbullah's warfare capability and afforded it confidence in its military abilities.

Hizbullah's Plan to Conquer the Galilee

At the beginning of 2011, and during the revolt in Syria, Hizbullah formulated an operative plan for the conquest of the Galilee. The

mission was assigned to the Radwan forces, which began to train for the possibility that, in case of war with Israel, they would cross the border and seize control of settled areas within Israel. About 5,000 Radwan fighters were sent to Iran for rounds of training under Iranian instructors. According to a source close to Hizbullah, five battalions were set up in Hizbullah, each with a thousand fighters, and each battalion was assigned a specific territory to take over in northern Israel. Each battalion studied and became familiar with the special topographical conditions of the area it was responsible for and trained to conquer it. The war in Syria indeed interrupted the preoccupation with this plan, but it also, as noted, enabled the Radwan forces to accumulate highly valuable battlefield experience for the future.

Hizbullah's plan to conquer the Galilee was not abandoned because of the campaign in Syria. On the contrary, Nasrallah repeated several times his threats to take over the Galilee if and when war broke out with Israel. Hizbullah also invested great engineering efforts in digging tunnels from Lebanon into Israel. In December 2018 Israel uncovered six of these tunnels. Lt.-Gen. Eizenkot remarked that Hizbullah had a "grandiose plan" for a surprise underground infiltration of 5,000 fighters into Israeli territory amid a barrage of fire. Eizenkot disclosed that Israel had already become aware of Hizbullah's plan in 2014. All six of the tunnels were blown up, and Hizbullah lost an important operational capability. Nasrallah, however, did not shelve his plan to seize control of parts of the Galilee in the next war.

Iran's Precision-Guided Missile Project

The war in Syria revealed the extent of Iran's involvement in transferring strategic weaponry, some of it game-changing, to Hizbullah. Most of the Iranian effort involved transferring long-range missiles to Hizbullah and developing their precision capabilities. At first, factories for the precision-guided missile project were built in Syria, but they were discovered and bombed by Israel and so were relocated to Lebanon, where they were also soon discovered. Israel

made clear that it viewed the precision of Hizbullah's missiles as a red line and would not allow such missiles to be produced or transferred to Hizbullah. Israel was prepared to take risks in the conflict with Hizbullah. In August 2019 two drones penetrated the very heart of Hizbullah, the Dahieh neighborhood of Beirut. The objective was to strike a critical ingredient of the precision-guided missile project. According to *The Times of London*, "The targeted facility was used to store a high-end industrial planetary mixer, a component in high-grade precision missiles' propellant." The drones identified the facility and destroyed it. For Nasrallah there was nothing left but to keep threatening. Although Israel recorded an important achievement in the war on the precision-guided missile project, Hizbullah and Iran did not put an end to it.

In July 2020 the *Jerusalem Post* reported that Hizbullah has at least 28 missile-launch sites in populated areas of Beirut that are under its control. These include private homes, medical centers, industrial zones, and offices. The sites are involved in the launching, storing, and production of medium-range Fateh-110 missiles and are part of Hizbullah's precision-guided missile project. Hizbullah is believed to have 600 Fateh-110 missiles with ranges of up to 300 kilometers, among them more advanced missiles of the Zulfiqar model with ranges of up to 700 kilometers. Overall, Hizbullah is believed to have 130,000 missiles and rockets with ranges of 10 to 500 kilometers, also dispersed in southern Lebanon and the Bekaa Valley in bunkers that are next to schools, clinics, hospitals, soccer fields, as well as the Iranian embassy in Beirut and the Lebanese Defense Ministry.

An Additional Front Against Israel in the Golan Heights

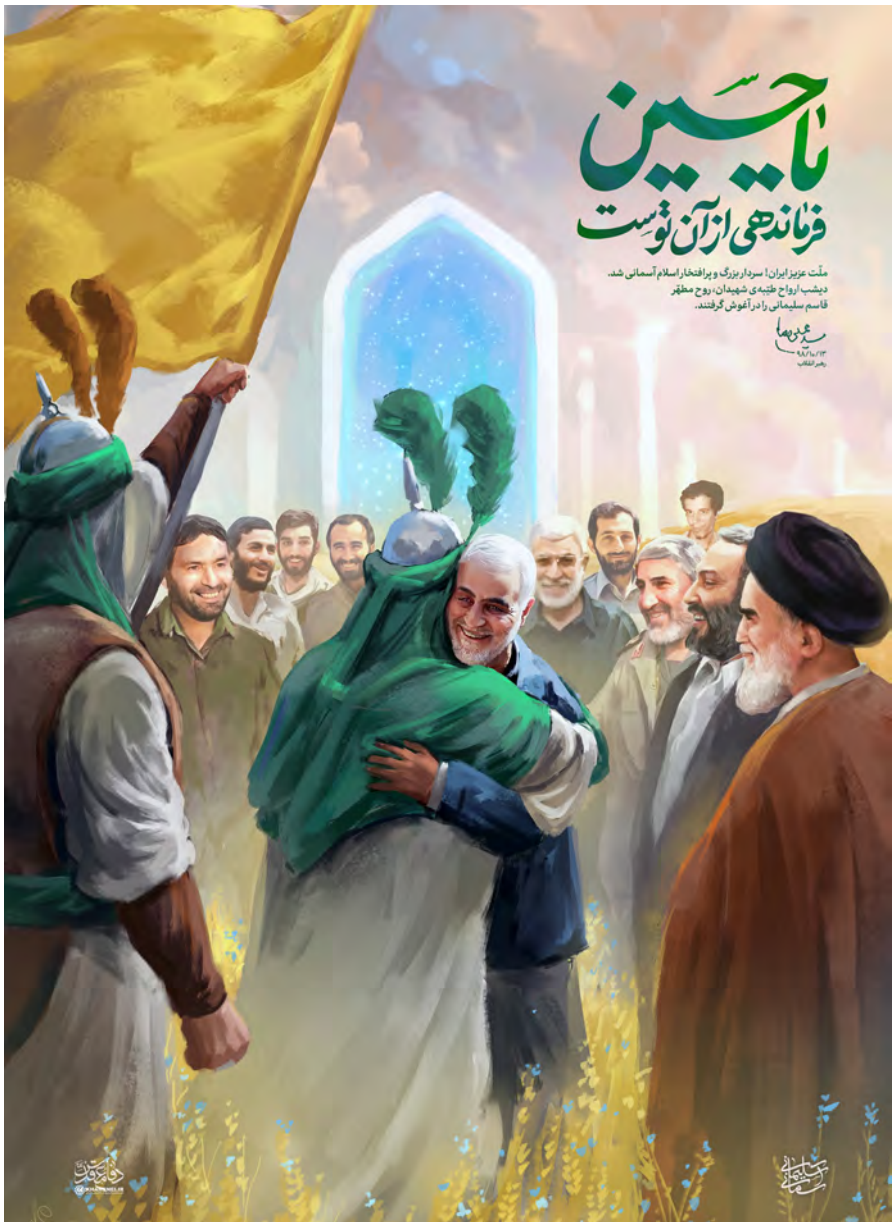
Another arena in which Iran and Hizbullah have operated is the Golan Heights. The goal was and remains to build an operational infrastructure that is reliant on the local population in the Syrian Golan Heights, which is primarily Druze and has remained loyal to the Assad regime, and to use this infrastructure to act against Israel. This mission,

which Hizbullah refers to as "the Golan file," was assigned to Jihad Mughniyeh, who, after his father's assassination in 2008, was taken under the patronage of Qasem Soleimani, who treated him as a son. In January 2015, during a "commanders' patrol" of the Quneitra area that included senior Iranian officers, Jihad Mughniyeh, Iranian General Mohammad Allhadadi, and other Hizbullah operatives including Ali Tabatabi, one of the senior commanders of the Radwan forces, were killed. Israel stated that it would not allow the establishment of a Hizbullah infrastructure on the Golan. The attempts to create "Hizbullah Syria" on the Syrian Golan failed as well when Hizbullah's commander of the Golan front, Samir Kuntar, was assassinated in December 2015.

Iran and Hizbullah did not abandon the idea of making the Golan Heights part of a confrontation line with Israel that extends from the Mediterranean to the Golan. Munir Ali Naim ("Hajj Hashem"), Hizbullah's commander of the Golan front since June 2016, now operates in Damascus and appears to guard his steps very carefully.

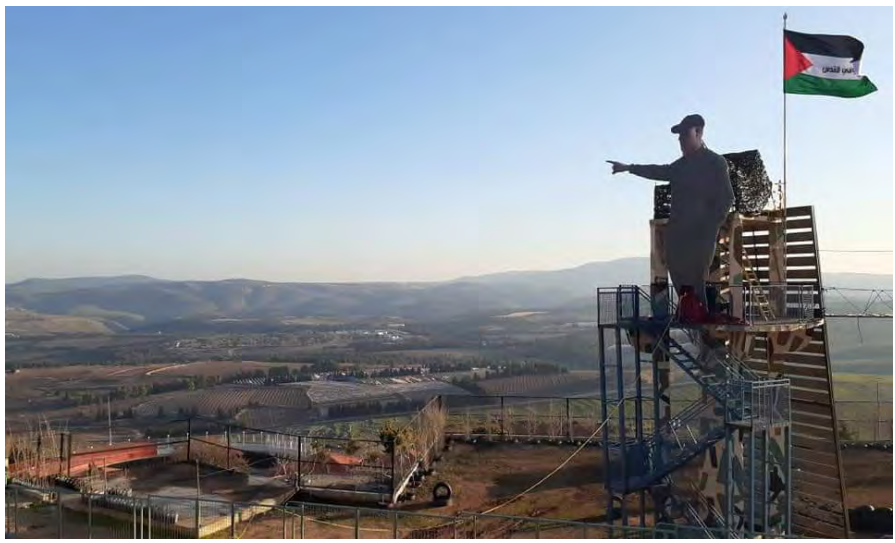
The Death of Qasem Soleimani

The assassination of Qasem Soleimani by the United States in January 2020 poses a question mark about the extent of the future ties between the Revolutionary Guards and Hizbullah. Esmail Ghaani, who was Soleimani's deputy and replaced him in the post, was mainly involved in Afghanistan and Iraq and hardly at all in the Lebanese arena. That is the reason Gen. Mohammad Hossein Zada Hejazi was appointed as his deputy. Hejazi was commander of the Revolutionary Guards in Lebanon and in charge of Hizbullah's precision-guided missile project. It appears that Iran will continue to deal with this issue, which is of great importance from Tehran's standpoint, but it is not clear to what extent and at what intensity the project will be conducted in the absence of Soleimani.



Issued by Supreme Leader Khamenei's office, this shows Imam Hussein, dressed in battle attire, welcoming Qasem Soleimani to heaven with a warm embrace. Watching is Ayatollah Khomeini and next to him, Imad Mughniyeh and military commanders killed in the wars with Iraq and in Syria. Qasem Soleimani has entered the pantheon of Iran's commanders.

Meanwhile Hassan Nasrallah is cultivating Soleimani's legacy in Lebanon. Hizbullah erected a statue of him in the town of Maroun al-Ras near the border with Israel across from Moshav Avivim. It depicts him pointing toward the Galilee, with the Palestinian flag flying at his side. This is to signify the goal of fulfilling Soleimani's vision – the destruction of Israel. His oldest daughter, Zainab, made clear in a speech in his memory that the revenge for her father's death will be taken by her "uncle" Hassan Nasrallah. Less than a year after his death, Zainab married the son of Hashem Safieddine, who heads Hizbullah's Executive Council, is second in importance to Nasrallah, and will probably succeed him if and when he ends his tenure. The marriage bond between these top echelon revolutionary Shiite families symbolizes the depth of the ties between Iran and Hizbullah.



Hizbullah outpost in Southern Lebanon flying the Palestinian flag, showing sculpture of Qasem Soleimani pointing toward the Galilee across the Israeli border.

An iconic picture issued by Khamenei's office shows a scene in heaven in which Imam Hussein, wearing battle attire, welcomes Qasem Soleimani with a warm embrace. Beside them watching stand Ayatollah Khomeini and, next to him, Imad Mughniyeh and military

commanders who were killed in the wars with Iraq and in Syria. Qasem Soleimani has entered the pantheon of Iran's commanders.

In July 2020, Nasrallah sent his fighters on a retaliatory operation for the death of a Hizbullah member in an airstrike in Damascus that was attributed to Israel. A Hizbullah force approached an Israeli position in the Shebaa Farms and was spotted before it managed to open fire. In Israel it was decided not to kill the Hizbullah fighters, and they went back into Lebanon. Nasrallah claimed that such an event had not occurred. Israel proved that strategic objectives have priority over achieving tactical objectives. In the current reality it was clear that killing the Hizbullah fighters would spark hostilities that could threaten Israel's main struggle against the Iranian entrenchment in Syria, the weapons transfers to Hizbullah, and against the precision-guided missile project. Israel was willing to sacrifice a pawn for a king. Hizbullah's "right to respond" has yet to come.

In early August 2020, Israel exposed a cell that planted explosive devices near its border in the southern Golan Heights. This time the cell was eliminated. Israel was unwilling to allow military activity and the establishment of hostile elements on the Golan Heights border. No organization claimed responsibility for the failed attempt. The precise identification of the cell has yet to be confirmed. Israel assumed that militants belonging to Shiite militias operating in the Golan Heights area under Iranian command launched the cell. The attack was possibly carried out without Hizbullah's knowledge. Hizbullah itself did not act in response to Israel's elimination of the terror cell in the southern Golan Heights.

On August 4, 2020, a massive explosion rocked the Beirut port, killing more than 150 people and wounding more than six thousand, with 21 people missing. No one took responsibility, and the investigation into the incident is ongoing. Many questions will be directed to Hizbullah, which controls the port of Beirut and maintains nearby weapons and missiles caches of various types. These storage facilities are located

in densely-populated civilian areas around the port and in other neighborhoods.

In a speech broadcast from his safe hiding place, Hassan Nasrallah denied that Hizbullah had any responsibility for the incident. He denied that Hizbullah had weapons and explosives depots in Beirut port, and that it had any control over the port. He also added cynically that Hizbullah knows more about Haifa port than about Beirut port. Nasrallah's speech provoked much outrage and fueled massive protests in Beirut, in which a likeness of Nasrallah was hung with a noose.

The intensity of the incident will most likely inflame anew the internal debate in Lebanon regarding Hizbullah's military power, which is under Iranian control, not Lebanese authority. Therefore, demands for Hizbullah's disarmament will increase.

The international mobilization to support Lebanon comes mainly from the U.S., Western countries, and some Arab states that must condition their aid to Lebanon and to the Lebanese army on Hizbullah's disarmament. This includes its missiles and rockets, as well as small arms. Hizbullah must become solely a political party.

Israel Revealed the Weapons that Sit beneath Lebanon's Civilians

Israel's Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu revealed on September 29, 2020, in an address broadcast to the UN General Assembly, the locations of Hizbullah's production and storage facilities for missiles adjacent to a gas storage site and civilian residences in the Janh neighborhood of Beirut. Netanyahu accused Hizbullah of endangering the civilian population. He tied the massive August 2020 explosion in the Beirut Port to Hizbullah weapons depots stored in the port.

In a statement released after Netanyahu's speech, the IDF Spokesperson revealed the underground facilities for the production of precision

missiles in two other neighborhoods in west Beirut, Laylaki and Chouaifet, located beneath residential buildings and located near a mosque, church, and medical center.

Nasrallah denied Netanyahu's remarks and invited media representatives in Lebanon to visit and check the sites revealed by Netanyahu to see if they contained missiles. Hizbullah made an immediate explanatory PR effort to show that there were no missiles at the site, but in the reporters' videos, Israeli intelligence identified "a laser cutting machine, a hydraulic cutting machine, a metal rolling machine, and a press for bending metal" – all equipment that can produce components for precision-guided missiles. According to military intelligence, the cutters could be used to create "warheads" and "stabilization fins." A senior intelligence source who provided the information to Netanyahu said the disclosure of this information caused Nasrallah great embarrassment. Nasrallah hurried to invite journalists to one specific site rather than the other two. "We know what he has hastily removed from there," said the source. "Nasrallah was sweating on the day of his speech. He knows what our level of (intelligence) penetration is."

A reporter from the Beirut-based *Al Mayadeen* satellite news channel was permitted into part of a closed area at the site and photographed an advanced hydraulic CNC machine from Turkey, used for cutting and shaping metal tubes.

Despite Israel's exposé, Hizbullah denied that it manufactures and stores missiles in civilian residential areas and expressed satisfaction with Nasrallah's course of public relations. Sources close to Nasrallah claim that "Netanyahu lost the PR battle within hours, and he didn't think for a moment that would happen." They continued: "Netanyahu fell victim to his traditional showmanship, and it was a professional error of strategic dimensions.... He propagated false information to incite against Hizbullah at the UN." In an interview, Nasrallah charged, "Netanyahu was inciting the Lebanese people against Hizbullah, as usual."

It appears that despite Nasrallah's "blitz" of media denials, Hizbullah continues to manufacture and stockpile missiles and rockets inside civilian areas that serve as human shields. This is how things are in the densely populated neighborhoods of Beirut, the villages and towns of southern Lebanon, and the Baalbek region.

The struggle between Hizbullah and Israel is at full throttle. Hizbullah, with Iran's help, is working to build long-range capabilities that will allow it to strike precise targets in the Israeli home front. Israel is resolved to prevent Hizbullah from gaining that capability. Even though both sides want to avoid a war, the conflict between them could spin out of control if one side makes a miscalculation. Meanwhile, Hizbullah is also building a capability to use special forces to seize lands in the Galilee. This marks a basic change in Hizbullah's approach to war, which until now primarily focused on building deterrent and defensive capabilities, and now is also dealing intensively with offense and with taking the war into Israeli territory.

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ISBN 978-965-218-155-8

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