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# Power Outage

## Syrian Armed Group Alliances in the Balance

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## ABSTRACT

Syrian alignment with Palestinian and Lebanese Shia armed groups that were born out of the Arab-Israeli conflict has been a constant of Middle Eastern security politics for almost fifty years. The increasingly violent domestic uprising and the challenge that it poses to the Assad regime has led some analysts to worry that a foundering Assad regime could use its armed group agents to stir up regional trouble, which raises the question of how much power Syria really has over its regional armed group proxies. This paper argues that it has less than many think. Rather than ideology, Syrian state power has long been the key determinant of the degree of Syria's alignment with external armed groups. As Syrian state power continues to decline, so does its control over its armed group allies. This paper examines the state of Syria's regional armed group allies today in the face of Syrian decline. As the domestic struggle for Syria continues, the United States and its allies have the opportunity to further isolate Syria's armed group allies operating in Lebanon and the Occupied Territories. Increased attention to Lebanon could further reduce the chance of regional spillover from the crisis, and diminish a principal cause of continued instability in the region.

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

**Introduction** ..... **3**

**Syria and Regional Armed Groups: Allies and Agents** ..... **5**

Syrian State Power ..... 5

Principal Tenants of Syrian State Power ..... 6

Syrian Control of Regional Armed Group Actors ..... 7

Syrian State Power—A Long, Slow Decline ..... 9

**Remaining Rejectionists—The Alliance of Palestinian Forces** ..... **12**

Diminished Control ..... 13

Hizballah ..... 14

Hizballah's Arsenal ..... 15

**Disarmament** ..... **17**

**Domestic Uprising and Increased International Isolation** ..... **19**

**Recommendations** ..... **21**

Increase the Pressure: Shore Up the Eastern Front ..... 21

Increased Aid and Cooperation with the LAF ..... 21

Expanding UNIFIL's Role ..... 22

Increase the Pressure: By Land and By Sea ..... 22

Co-opt the Threat: No Quarter—Allied Quarter ..... 22

# INTRODUCTION

As the domestic struggle for Syria grinds into its second year, many analysts continue to fear that the crisis will spill over into other parts of the region, starting with Lebanon.[1] This is justifiable given the continued weakness of the Lebanese state, the signs of renewed friction among its ethnic and confessional communities, and the various Syrian- and Iranian-supported armed groups operating in the state. Syria's domestic crisis poses a legitimate threat to the region, and most directly to Lebanon, but it is unlikely that the Assad regime will spark a regional crisis by pulling the strings of its armed group allies in Lebanon and the Occupied Territories.

Under increasing regional and international opprobrium, Bashar al-Assad is facing not only the largest challenge to his regime during his tenure as president, he is facing a challenge to the entire state structure that his father Hafez al-Assad constructed over forty years ago. Although Bashar al-Assad's determination to remain in power may be strong, the same cannot be said of the state institutions and regional allies underpinning that power. As Syrian state power declines, so does its ability to maintain its alliances with the regional armed groups that have been the key to Syrian regional power for the last several decades.

One often overlooked reason for Syria's relative success as an Arab state power broker is its ability to control and align the interests of the regional armed groups that grew out of the Arab-Israeli conflicts. This ability allows Syria to project power into its regional flanks in Lebanon and the Occupied Territories, with Lebanon bearing the brunt of Syria's strategic balancing game with Israel.

Today, Syrian interference continues to overshadow security politics throughout the Levant, especially in Lebanon.[2] Syria maintains significant influence over the March 8th

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[1] See, for example, Mona Yacoubian, "Regional Dynamics of the Syrian Uprising: The Impact on Lebanon and Hezbollah," United States Institute of Peace, Brief 107, October 13, 2011, http://www.usip.org/files/resources/PB%20107.pdf; and Aram Nerguizian, "Instability in Syria: Assessing the Risks of Military Intervention," Center for Strategic and International Studies, December 13, 2011, http://csis.org/files/publication/111213_SyriaMilitaryIntervention.pdf.

[2] The Levant is a region that covers the area originally known as the *Bilad al-Sham* (Greater Syria in Arabic), which is broken into four nation-states (Syria, Israel, Jordan, and Lebanon) and the Occupied Territories today.

alliance that currently holds power in Beirut, as well as the majority of important Palestinian rejectionist armed groups, and the Shia groups Hizballah and Amal. These groups provide Syria with regional political strength and strategic depth. Yet, as Syrian power continues to decline under the weight of the increasingly violent domestic uprising and heightened international sanctions, its ability to maintain these power outlets is being put to the test.

Most indicators point to a protracted struggle between the Assad regime and its domestic challengers, but it is becoming increasingly clear that a return to the status quo ante is no longer an option. If the regime does fall, then the struggle for power at the domestic level will be intense, and will likely involve a settling of scores between the ruling Alawi sect and the country's majority Sunni population, as well as a lengthy contest to undo the standing regime's powerful embedded institutions. If the regime manages to maintain its hold on power, it will be significantly weakened and more isolated. Either way, the crisis in Syria presents an opportunity for regional and Western powers to shift the balance of power in the Levant significantly. By stymieing the flow of Syrian state support, they can reduce the power of armed group actors and help push them back to the margins of the regional security dilemmas.

This report highlights the rise and fall of Syrian state power and its role in the management of the state's regional armed group allies. It then examines the standing of these armed groups today as their principal supporter faces continued domestic unrest. Given the significant problems involved in direct military intervention in Syria, it concludes by recommending several steps that could be taken to further isolate and diminish Syria's power via the indirect means of weakening its ties to its regional armed group agents.

# SYRIA AND REGIONAL ARMED GROUPS: ALLIES AND AGENTS

Since their initial attempts at organization in the late 1950s and early 1960s, the scattered but disruptive Palestinian armed groups have been a serious threat to the Arab nation-states in the Levant. With their "official" launch of operations on New Year's Day in 1965, the armed groups introduced a security threat that likely was a precipitant cause of the 1967 Arab-Israeli war, led Jordan to civil war in 1970, and brought down the Lebanese state by 1975.[3]

Syria has always been the most vocal champion of the Palestinian armed groups. Because of its relative weakness throughout the 1960s, Syria served mainly as an ally to the groups, allowing them access to Syrian territory from which to launch attacks on Israel, as well as providing them with funding and materiel supply. The Palestinian armed group attacks launched on Israel from Syrian territory escalated from 1965 to 1967, and they became a precipitant cause of the 1967 Arab-Israeli War. Supporting the armed groups proved to be particularly costly for Syria as most of its army was subsequently destroyed in the war.

As a result of the disaster of the 1967 war, Hafez al-Assad, then the Syrian Minister of Defense, recognized that a strong state was needed to shift the role of the groups from allies to agents that could help secure Syrian domestic stability and increase the state's regional power.[4]

## SYRIAN STATE POWER

After he assumed executive control of the country in 1970, Hafez al-Assad oversaw Syria's transition from one of the Middle East's weakest and least stable states to a sturdy regional middle power, shifting its role from that of a regional policy taker to that of a

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[3] Robert Burrowes and Douglas Muzzio, "The Road to the Six Day War: Aspects of an Enumerative History of Four Arab States and Israel, 1965–1967," *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 16, No. 2 (June 1972), pp. 211–226. See also Yezid Sayigh, *Armed Struggle and the Search for State: The Palestinian National Movement 1949–1993* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1997).

[4] Hafez al-Assad officially retained his title of Minister of Defense until 1972, even though he had already assumed control of the presidency by that point. He handed the defense portfolio over to Mustafa Tlass in 1972.

central power broker.[5] A primary tenet of his regional policy was to develop Syria into a stand-alone power capable of resisting Israel.[6]

***Principal Tenants of Syrian State Power***

Internally, the Assad regime relies on three primary pillars of support—the Baath party, the military and domestic security services, and the ministerial bureaucracy. The presidency is paramount, riding atop all three pillars both legally and politically. The military established itself as the primary pillar of power when Hafez al-Assad assumed the presidency, and the Assad regime consolidated its own position by constructing an inner security circle of Alawi military elites and buying the allegiance of the Sunni majority through patronage systems that benefitted the urban upper-class merchant families.[7]

Complete control of the military is crucial for the Assad regime as it allows the president to appoint and dismiss senior officers at will. Hafez al-Assad structured secure and loyal forces not only to protect the regime domestically, but also to ensure that the military would fall in line behind his foreign policy. Once in power, he dramatically increased the materiel and manpower of the Syrian military until it ranked among the most powerful and modernized of the Arab armies. To maintain this position, Syria has relied on external balancing measures such as close military ties with the Soviet Union and a strategic regional alliance with Revolutionary Iran.[8]

Hafez al-Assad's control and growth of the military freed him from the internal politics of the Baath party and allowed him to direct the presidential powers toward foreign and

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[5]Anoushiravan Ehteshami and Raymond A. Hinnebusch, *Syria and Iran: Middle Powers in a Penetrated Regional System* (London: Routledge, 1997).

[6] Hafez al-Assad planned a "corrective movement" for Syria in the wake of the 1970 coup with the hope of securing Syria domestically and making it a formidable regional power. See Patrick Seale, *Asad: The Struggle for the Middle East* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995).

[7] Raymond Hinnebusch, "The Ba'th Party in Post-Ba'thist Syria: President, Party, and the Struggle for 'Reform,'" *Middle East Critique*, Vol. 20, No. 2 (Summer 2011), p. 110.

[8] The following are excellent sources for further reading on the rise of Syrian power under the Assad regime: Seale, *Asad;* Moshe Ma'oz, *Asad: The Sphinx of Damascus* (New York: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1988); Raymond Hinnebusch, *Syria: Revolution from Above* (London: Routledge, 2001); Volker Perthes, *The Political Economy of Syria under Asad* (New York: I.B.Tauris, 1995); and Eyal Zisser, *Commanding Syria: Bashar al-Asad and the First Years in Power* (New York: I.B.Tauris, 2007). Other excellent studies of Assad's state can be found in Malik Mufti, *Sovereign Creations: Pan-Arabism and Political Order in Syria and Iraq* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1996); and Flynt Leverett, *Inheriting Syria: Bashar's Trial by Fire* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2005).

security policies.[9] When Hafez assumed presidency in late 1970, the military consisted of 90,000 men with a budget of $177 million (about 9.8 percent of the state's gross domestic product [GDP]).[10] In the first year of his presidency, Hafez al-Assad increased funding for the military to more than half of the Syrian annual budget. By the eve of the 1973 war, Soviet arms supply had improved Syrian air and land mobility to the point that Syria was one of the stronger militaries in the region at the time, and its troop levels had multiplied to about 160,000.[11] Over the next ten years, Hafez al-Assad increased Syrian active military manpower to more than 400,000, and by 1983 he was allocating 22 percent of Syria's annual GDP toward its defense budget.[12]

Although Syrian forces could not defeat Israel directly, Hafez al-Assad led them into an indirect conflict with the Israeli Defense Forces in Lebanon in 1982. A primary component of this conflict was Syrian use of Palestinian armed groups. Hafez al-Assad used his newfound state power to co-opt the region's disruptive armed group presence and turn them into regional agents.

### *Syrian Control of Regional Armed Group Actors*

Syria's role vis-à-vis the Palestinian armed groups changed dramatically after its conquest of Lebanon beginning in 1976. Its brutal operations in Lebanon against the Palestinians allowed Syria to establish hierarchical control over the disparate Palestinian armed groups operating in the country. As noted above, Hafez al-Assad developed Syrian state power to such a degree that he was able to substantially alter the dynamic of Syria's alignment with Palestinian armed groups, bending the weaker armed groups to Syrian will, and punishing those that chose to resist.

The acquisition of North and Eastern Lebanon gave Syria access to territory within the operating space of many of the Palestinian and Lebanese armed groups, allowing Syria to install crucial control mechanisms such as elaborate communications systems, infiltrating

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[9] Leverett, *Inheriting Syria*, p. 111.
[10] See the U.S. National Archives and Records Administration, General Records of the Department of State, Bureau of Near Eastern and South Asian Affairs, Office of Lebanon, Jordan, Syria, and Iraq Affairs, Records Relating to Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon and Syria, 1966–1972, No. 5624, box 11.
[11] Ibid.; see also Mohe Ma'oz, *Syria and Israel: From War to Peacemaking* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1995), pp. 122–123.
[12] Anthony Cordesmann and Aram Nerguizian, "The Arab-Israeli Military Balance: Conventional Realities and Asymmetric Challenges," Center for Strategic and International Studies, June 29, 2010, http://csis.org/files/publication/100629_Arab-IsraeliMilBal.pdf.

elements of its domestic intelligence services, and numerous military cantonments. Syria exploited its territorial and strategic positioning to control the flow of arms to the Palestinian armed groups and to expand its control to other groups born out of the Lebanese civil war, specifically Amal and Hizballah.[13]

At the end of the 1975–1990 Lebanese civil war, the 1989 Taif Accords officially sanctioned Syrian military dominance of Lebanon.[14] Such control enabled Hafez al-Assad to disarm specific groups in the region that were not in line with Syrian interests and to bolster the strength of those that were.[15]

Assad controlled the Syrian armed group allies in part by keeping the relationship ill-defined but very much hierarchical. Assad kept individual leaders at arm's length and often played one group's interests off those of another, actively curbing the growth of several groups he believed to be straying from Syrian interests.

In addition, Hafez al-Assad penalized bad behavior either by imprisoning individual leaders or by using Syrian forces to bring insubordinate groups into line or even, in extreme cases, to destroy them.[16] Syrian military intelligence developed an intricate system of surveillance not only for group activities but also to monitor individual group members and their families.[17] By brandishing the Syrian threat deterrent, Hafez al-Assad was able to control the size and scope of Palestinian and Lebanese Shia armed group operations, aligning the groups' activities with Syrian regional interests and directing their activities away from Syria.

For example, Hafez al-Assad was willing to spare Hizballah from a direct Syrian assault when it fought against Amal, Syria's principal Shia armed group ally at the time, during the War of the Camps from 1985–1988. In many respects, Hafez al-Assad acted to accommodate the strategic concerns of his Iranian allies.[18] He did, however, apply

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[13] David Hirst, *Beware of Small States: Lebanon, Battleground of the Middle East* (New York: Nation, 2010); and Seale, *Asad*.
[14] Leverett, *Inheriting Syria*, pp. 42–43. See also Michael Young, "Lords over Lebanon: Syria's Still in Charge, but the U.S. Presence in Iraq Could Change That," *Slate*, May 8, 2003.
[15] Hirst, *Beware of Small States*, pp. 220–224.
[16] Author interview with Yezid Sayigh, Beirut, 2011. See also Seale, *Asad*.
[17] Young, "Lords over Lebanon."
[18] Joobin M. Goodarzi, *Syria and Iran: Alliance and Power Politics in the Middle East* (London: Tauris Academic Studies, 2006). Although Syria did, from time to time, accommodate Iranian interests in the

Syrian power to control the growth and diversification of Hizballah's role in southern Lebanon after it had positioned itself as the predominant Shia armed group in the region. As Hizballah continued to strengthen in the early 1990s, Hafez al-Assad squashed its attempts to garner political power in Beirut in the aftermath of Israel's Operation Grapes of Wrath in 1996, demonstrating Syria's ability to limit the growth of groups operating in Lebanon.[19] Furthermore, he allowed Syria to act as a funnel for arms shipments coming from Iran, and thereby monitored the size and scope of arms shipments, but abstained from taking on the role of an active arms provider.

### *Syrian State Power—A Long, Slow Decline*

When Bashar al-Assad took power in 2000, the perception was that Syria had transitioned power from father to son seamlessly, and that it still maintained a formidable military.[20] In reality, however, decades of internecine strife had rent the formerly solid Baath structure, weakening Bashar al-Assad's leadership, and members of the old guard differed in their opinions of the young Assad's ability to rule Syria competently.

Baath Party discord first become manifest in the mid-1980s,[21] and by the time of Bashar al-Assad's accession, the party was divided about the direction of the state. Factions of the party soon began to resist the control of the new president.[22] Party rivalry was at its peak from 2000 to 2005.[23] The debate centered on the perception of the "old guard" Baath party leadership that Bashar al-Assad was too immature, inexperienced, ideological, and impulsive to control the presidency as his father had.[24] Although party loyalty eventually rallied around the younger Assad, the conflict was not without its costs as many members were cast out and the inner circle close to the president shrank.[25]

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Levant, particularly regarding Hizballah, al-Assad was able to maintain Syria's predominance over Iran vis-à-vis the alliance's security politics in the Levant.

[19] Leverett, *Inheriting Syria*, pp. 108–109.

[20] See, for example, Flynt Leverett, *Inheriting Syria*; Volker Perthes "The Political Economy of the Syrian Succession," *Survival*, Vol. 43, No. 1 (Spring 2001); and David Lesch, *The New Lion of Damascus: Bashar al-Asad and Modern Syria* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005).

[21] Party elections were put on hold because residual fears from the Muslim Brotherhood uprising had a stultifying affect on the party under President al-Assad.

[22] Hinnebusch, "The Ba'th Party in Post-Ba'thist Syria," p. 113.

[23] Ibid.

[24] Zisser, *Commanding Syria*, p. 162.

[25] One of the biggest casualties was the resignation of Abdul Halim Khaddam, Vice President of Syria from 1984 to 2005. Branded a traitor, Khaddam fled Syria for Paris where he still resides. During the rule of

The most visible blow to Syrian power was the loss of Soviet support in 1991. The demise of the Soviet Union cost Syria its crucial external link to the resources needed to maintain its military power. It had built up a commanding arsenal, but was no longer able to replenish it, and maintenance proved difficult. In 2009 Syria spent only about 3.5 percent of GDP on defense, capping a slow decline over the span of two decades—a far cry from its peak of more than 20 percent in the early 1980s.[26]

Syria tried to compensate for its declining conventional military power by focusing on a domestic missile manufacturing capacity, but it was unable to maintain any real relevant technological edge in terms of weaponry.[27] As a result, the state began to rely on the dual deterrent of its nebulous chemical weapons program and its allied armed groups. At a time when the Syrian regime was beginning to be tested regionally and globally, this signaled a lack of state power to deal with these challenges easily.

On April 16, 2001, in response to an earlier attack by Hizballah, Israeli fighter jets attacked a Syrian radar installation in Dahr al-Baydar near Mount Lebanon, killing four Syrian soldiers. This was the first frontal military confrontation between Syria and Israel since November 1985 in southern Lebanon. A little over two months later, Israel attacked another Syrian radar station in the Bekaa Valley, again in response to an attack by Hizballah.[28] A year later, Israel pushed further and struck the Ayn Sahab Palestinian refugee camp just north of Damascus. This was the first attack on Syrian soil since the 1973 war. All three attacks went without response from Syria.[29]

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Hafez al-Assad, Khaddam was one of the closest and most trusted loyalists of the president. Khaddam was one of the few Sunni Arabs to have penetrated the Alawi inner circle controlling Syria under the Assads.

[26] Although Israeli defense expenses as a percent of GDP also fell considerably over the same time period, the relative size of GDP growth in each country differed greatly. In 1982 Israel's GDP was approximately $25 billion and Syria's was approximately $16 billion. By 2010 Israel's GDP had reached $217 billion and Syria's had reached only $59 billion. As a result, although the percentages spent on defense by each country were similar, the amounts varied greatly.

[27] Eyal Zisser, "The Syrian Army: Between Domestic and External Fronts," *Middle East Review of International Affairs*, Vol. 5, No. 1 (March 2001).

[28] Ibid.

[29] The statement that Syria had its own means of response, implying that Syria could respond, and that it would do so at a time and place of its choosing, became a common refrain of Bashar al-Assad's speeches and interviews. He even gave this warning in response to the Israeli destruction of the nascent Syrian nuclear site in September 2007. See Lyse Doucet, "Analysis: Syria-Israel Tensions," BBC News, October 3, 2007, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/7026003.stm.

Syria's regional and global security situation continued to decline after the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003. Syria soon found itself on the wrong side of President Bush's regional policy. Its support for the armed groups resisting Israel landed the country several new layers of international sanctions which, although not as crippling as hoped for by the countries implementing them, further reduced Syria's economic viability and increased its regional and global isolation.[30] By the spring of 2005, Syria was forced to abandon its military position in Lebanon after the assassination of former Prime Minister Rafik Hariri, the orchestration of which was blamed on Syria.

More drastic indications of Syrian weakness soon followed. On September 6, 2007, Israeli jets penetrated Syrian airspace to destroy what Israeli and U.S. intelligence reports claimed was a nascent nuclear reactor being constructed with North Korean assistance.[31] A year later, on October 8, 2008, U.S. gunships led a commando raid on an insurgent transfer base at Abu Kamal, a city in the Syrian Desert near the Iraqi border.[32]

Syria was, however, able to maintain a position of relative regional power given its continuing strategic alliance with Iran, its alignment with Palestinian rejectionist armed groups operating in Lebanon and the Gaza Strip, and the Lebanese Shia armed groups Hizballah and Amal.

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[30] Author interview with Syrian economist Nabil Sukkar, Damascus, January 2008.
[31] Seymour M. Hersh, "A Strike in the Dark: What Did Israel Bomb in Syria?" *New Yorker*, February 11, 2008.
[32] Eric Schmitt and Thom Shanker, "U.S. Says Iraqi Militant Killed in Syria Raid," *New York Times*, October 28, 2008, http://www.nytimes.com/2008/10/28/world/africa/28iht-28syria.17295937.html.

## REMAINING REJECTIONISTS—THE ALLIANCE OF PALESTINIAN FORCES

Today, Syria's primary Palestinian armed group allies in Lebanon are grouped into the Alliance of Palestinian Forces, commonly referred to as the Tahaluf. The Tahaluf grew out of the 1993 Oslo peace process and is composed of groups seeking to continue the armed struggle against Israel. The most relevant players in the alliance are Hamas, Islamic Jihad, the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine-General Command (PFLP-GC), Fatah al-Intifada, and al-Saiqa.[33] All of these groups are, to varying degrees, aligned with Syria, with al-Saiqa a de facto brigade of the Syrian armed forces.

The strongest of Syria's Palestinian armed group allies are Hamas and the PFLP-GC. With its official headquarters in Damascus, Hamas has stepped in as the leading armed group of the Palestinian resistance. Although its presence is strongest in the Gaza strip and the West Bank, it operates in several of the Palestinian camps in Lebanon as well. Since its victory in the Palestinian Legislative Council elections in 2006 and its subsequent defeat of Fatah forces in Gaza, Hamas has proven to be the most capable of the Palestinian groups, and has therefore garnered increased Syrian support.[34] Hamas proved its capacity to maintain a hard balancing position against Israel when it withstood the month-long assault Operation Cast Lead by the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) from December 2008 to January 2009. In the wake of the engagement, Syria moved to replace Hamas's depleted stocks.[35]

In recent months, however, Hamas has shifted away from Damascus, and appears to be divided internally about whether to separate from the Assad regime entirely. Hamas Prime Minister Ismail Haniya has spoken out against the Assad regime and sided with the Syrian opposition. Khaled Meshal, the political leader, has remained relatively silent about the uprising, but has quietly moved his operations from Damascus to Doha.[36] An

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[33] Assessment of the relevance of various groups comes from author interviews with a senior U.S. Defense official, UNSCOL officials, and Nicholas Blanford, Beirut, Lebanon, 2011.
[34] Author interview with Matthew Levitt, a senior fellow at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, Washington, D.C., July, 2011.
[35] Ibid.
[36] Fares Akram, "In Break, Hamas Supports Syrian Opposition," *New York Times*, February 24, 2012, http://www.nytimes.com/2012/02/25/world/middleeast/hamas-leader-supports-syrian-opposition.html. See

official break with Syria is likely still stalled by the fear that it will lose Iranian funding as a result, something that it cannot afford right now with over 45,000 group members on Iran's payroll in Gaza alone.

The PFLP-GC is the other principal powerful Palestinian armed group operating in Lebanon. Syria has maintained rigid control over the PFLP-GC since its foundation. The group continues to maintain bases outside of its camps near Nahr el Bared and in the Bekaa Valley, and Syria supplies it with arms via the Bekaa Valley[37] and pays its members' salaries.[38]

### DIMINISHED CONTROL

Although it has managed to maintain a strong relationship with the PFLP-GC, Syria's ability to manipulate its armed group allies was seriously compromised after the withdrawal of Syrian forces from Lebanon in 2005. Syria maintained headquarters for most of its armed group allies in Damascus, but after the withdrawal it was no longer able to control and monitor them as directly as before. Syria still maintains a prominent military intelligence presence in Lebanon and controls the land borders into the Bekaa Valley, but its other mechanisms to control or coerce the armed groups have become increasingly limited.

Another reason for the reduction in Syria's ability to control its armed group allies is the increasing competence of the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) and its expanded control over Lebanese territory. The LAF is far more modernized and better equipped than it was five years ago, and its improvement is a direct result of increased U.S. funding and training in the wake of the 2006 war. Of the approximately $200 million that the Lebanese government receives from the United States, more than $100 million goes directly to the LAF.

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also BBC News, "Hamas Political Leaders Leave Syria for Egypt and Qatar," February 28, 2012, http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-17192278.

[37] Author interview with Timur Goksel, former Senior Advisor to UNIFIL, Beirut, December, 2011.

[38] Ibid.

[37] Aram Nerguizian, "Lebanese Civil-Military Dynamics: Weathering the Regional Storm?" The Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, November 21, 2011, http://carnegieendowment.org/sada/2011/11/21/lebanese-civil-military-dynamics-weathering-regional-storm/7oau.

As one senior U.S. Defense official stated, "[T]he LAF was barely in the Bekaa five years ago, [whereas] now they are strong there. This is a direct result of the United States' efforts to train and equip them." Furthermore, the LAF is now much better able to contain all of the Palestinian armed groups within the confines of the state's twelve official refugee camps—though its control still stops outside of the camps as internal security dynamics remain under the control of the various factions operating within them.

Despite these improvements, other analysts demur on being too positive about the progress of the LAF. Lebanese sectarian politics continue to plague its development, and a lack of cross-sectarian support means little financial support from the government in Beirut—financial support that is needed for its continued development and organization as well as the coordination of defense imperatives.[32] With persistent troubles at even the most basic levels, civil-military relations continue to stymie the development of an LAF capable of offering Lebanon a viable security alternative to armed group forces such as Hizballah in southern Lebanon.

### HIZBALLAH

Hizballah is clearly the most powerful armed group operating in the region, if not the world. Without Iranian funding, training, and arms supply, Hizballah would never have become the substantial fighting force that it is today. Although Syria played a pivotal intermediary role in the relationship between Iran and Hizballah, throughout the presidency of Hafez al-Assad it served mainly as the guardian of the supply routes through the Bekaa Valley.

Almost immediately upon assuming the presidency, Bashar al-Assad revised Hizballah's role in the Syrian regional security doctrine, upgrading the status of the group from aligned agent to principal ally. He even went so far as to develop a personal relationship with the group's leader, Hassan Nasrallah.[39] The new Syrian president also coupled strategic support for Iranian arms delivery to Hizballah with a notable increase in direct weapons supply to the group.[40]

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[38] Author interview with Nicholas Blanford, Beirut, December, 2011.
[39] Rubin Uzi, "The Rocket Campaign against Israel during the 2006 Lebanon War," *Mideast Security and Policy Studies*, No. 71 (The Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies, Bar-Ilan University, June 2007), p. 34.

The regime's bolstering of Hizballah's arms caches in the wake of the group's direct confrontations with the IDF is perhaps the most significant example of Syria's robust shift toward performance-based bonuses for its armed group allies. Hizballah, in particular, demonstrated a marked increase in its ability to project force in battle. The increase in force capacity is highlighted well by the decade from 1996 to 2006.

For two weeks starting on April 11, 1996, when the IDF launched Operation Grapes of Wrath in southern Lebanon, Hizballah's resistance forces launched approximately fifty-five mainly short-range 122-mm Katyusha rockets per day, with a total of 777 rockets recorded fired at Israeli targets over the duration of the campaign.[41] The campaign severely depleted Hizballah's stocks. Yet in the run-up to the 2006 Lebanon War, Hizballah was estimated to have somewhere between 10,000 and 14,000 rockets with varying ranges and destructive capacity. This indicates a massive replenishment of its arsenal—presumably via its Syrian and Iranian suppliers.[42]

During the campaign, Hizballah's resistance forces fired an estimated 4,000 rockets during the month-long engagement, averaging around 130 per day. The 220-rocket salvo on the final day of the campaign put a fine point on Hizballah's decade-long successful force development strategy. Again, though Hizballah was weakened, it was well rewarded by both Iran and Syria for its relatively successful use of force against the IDF.

### HIZBALLAH'S ARSENAL

In 2010 Israeli Defense Minister Ehud Barak estimated that Hizballah's arsenal exceeded 40,000 rockets, including rockets with far greater range and force potential than Hizballah had possessed prior to the 2006 war.[43] Many regional experts, however, are skeptical of this estimate. It is impossible to determine the exact size of Hizballah's weapons arsenal given that reports on either side are likely exaggerated. As one analyst told the author regarding the escalation of rhetoric surrounding Hizballah's weapons, "It is a convenient over estimation for both sides—Israel's attempt to maintain this as its largest threat and secure continued support from the U.S., and Hizballah [keeps estimates

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[40] Ibid., p. 34
[41] Ibid., p. 4
[43] Ed Blanche, "Hizbullah Rocket Creates Growing Concern in Israel," *IHS Jane's: Defense & Security Intelligence & Analysis*, IHS Global, May 20, 2010.

about its arsenal unclear] as a deterrent to Israel and UNIFIL/LAF disarmament."[44] Still, most analysts agree that Hizballah has rearmed to the point of exceeding its 2006 levels, and with a much higher level of sophistication.

In addition to vast amounts of small arms, Hizballah likely maintains a sizeable missile arsenal, supplied by both Iran and Syria, ranging from the small 107mm rockets to newer, Syrian-supplied Fatah A-110s and M600s that have vastly improved guidance systems and can deliver a 500kg payload at a range of up to 250km, with an accuracy of about 100m.[45] The majority of Hizballah's more effective missile stocks are 240–302mm rockets.

Early 2010 reports claimed that Syria had facilitated the transfer of at least one Scud D missile to Hizballah.[46] Although a liquid fuel rocket as large and heavy as a Scud D missile would be an onerous weapon for an armed group's arsenal, subsequent reports and interviews confirm the transfer.[47] The arrival of Scud missiles into the hands of Hizballah is yet another key deterrent for the group against Israel, as such a missile could target Israel's nuclear facilities at Dimona.

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[44] Author interview with Nicholas Blanford, Beirut, December 2011.
[45] Ibid.; and Cordesmann and Nerguizian, "The Arab-Israeli Military Balance."
[46] Charles Levinson and Jay Solomon, "Syria Gave Scuds to Hezbollah, U.S. Says," *Wall Street Journal*, April 10, 2010, http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052702304604204575182290135333282.html.
[47] Author interview with senior U.S. Defense official, Beirut, December, 2011.

## DISARMAMENT

As a result of the continued weakness of the LAF and the growing strength of the armed groups operating in Lebanon, United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1559, which calls not only for the withdrawal of Syrian forces from Lebanese territory but also for the disarmament of all militias in the country (Lebanese and non-Lebanese), is far from being implemented. The peacekeeping force operating in the south, the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL), however, has proven to be more effective since its mandate was altered on August 11, 2006 with UNSCR 1701.[48] There have been no major episodes in its southern zone of operations in the last six years,[49] whereas previously, there had been major clashes between the IDF and Hizballah at least once a year.[50] UNIFIL is able to assist the LAF more effectively in area patrols, thereby seriously constraining Hizballah's ability to operate in the south. In fact, since the 2006 war, UNIFIL troops have only come across Hizballah moving a weapons cache once, when an Italian patrol unit encountered a weapons-laden truck on March 30, 2008.[51]

Despite these successes, UNIFIL is still hampered by two major problems. The first is the constraints of its mandate. Initial attempts to significantly alter UNIFIL's mandate included an effort to couple UNSCR 1701 with a Multi-National Force (MNF) that would have been a far more robust reaction force. Because Israel refused to give its consent to the MNF, UNIFIL remains a weaker Chapter Six peacekeeping operation that is tasked with assisting the LAF in southern Lebanon to create a weapons-free zone.[52] As it stands, UNIFIL does not have the ability to search or disarm any militias operating in its

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[48] UNSCR 1701 calls for the cessation of hostilities between the IDF and Hizballah, and the full withdrawal of IDF forces from southern Lebanon in parallel to the deployment of LAF and UNIFIL soldiers into the area. Among other appeals, the resolution calls for a long-term solution based on the disarmament of all armed groups in Lebanon (indirectly implying Hizballah), and the removal of all armed forces other than LAF and UNIFIL south of the Litani River.

[49] Author interview with senior UNIFIL official, Beirut, December 2011. Resolution 1701 was passed by the Security Council while the 2006 Israel-Hizballah was still in progress (the war did not end until August 14).

[50] Author interview with senior UNIFIL official, Beirut, December 2011.

[51] Ibid.

[52] A Chapter Six operation is a consent-based peacekeeping operation that is lightly armed and is only allowed to use force in self-defense. A Chapter Seven operation is a far more robust operation that is differentiated from a Chapter Six essentially by the ability to use force in defense of its mandate. Chapter Seven operations became far more common in the wake of the Cold War and have proven to be far more effective than Chapter Six operations.

southern zone of operations. The second problem is that UNIFIL is only a finger in the dyke of a larger political problem—the stalled process of disarming Hizballah.

The quiet along the blue line between the IDF and Hizballah is, however, only partially attributable to UNIFIL's successes. The relative calm is likely the product of mutual apprehension on the part of both Israel and Hizballah. Since the 2006 war, both sides know that the next engagement will be of a much higher intensity, and they are therefore seeking to avoid responsibility for setting off any sort of spark.

## DOMESTIC UPRISING AND INCREASED INTERNATIONAL ISOLATION

A key component to Syrian regional balancing is its ability to maintain its alignment with the armed groups operating in Lebanon. The domestic uprising in Syria that began in March 2011 is a direct threat to this position. As I have demonstrated above, the Assad regime's control over these groups has been in steady decline over the past decade. In fact, the increased activity by Syria to supply groups such as Hizballah and Hamas could be interpreted as yet another sign of its growing weakness. By transferring away parts of its arsenal, it hopes to maintain its commitment as a regional resisting force, despite the decline of its relative power and its perceived inability to maintain this support.

Without Syrian participation, the supply line to the armed groups would become far more challenging. Such a reality would complicate Iran's ability to maintain its supply lines to Hizballah, and would likely further isolate the Palestinian armed groups within the refugee camps. Although some regional experts claim that Hizballah would still be able to receive funding and arms from Iran via sea ports or the airport in Beirut, this would clearly not be as effective or efficient.[53]

Today, Syrian state power is in precipitous decline in the face of robust sanctions from the international community. There are currently sanctions on leaders within the Syrian executive, the Baath party, the military, financial institutions, and the business community. The sanctions regime is being enforced by Turkey, the Arab League, the EU, and the United States, grinding to a halt almost all foreign investment and tourism. Syria is no longer able to sell its oil to its principal buyers in the EU, and rapid inflation is gripping all sectors of its economy. As a result, the government is in a balance of payments crisis.

The only reprieve that Syria has from these pressures is the continued support from Iran and two of its neighbors, Iraq and Lebanon, who still refuse to implement the Arab League sanctions. Iran has pledged billions of dollars in aid and trade to Syria to help the

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[53] Author interview with Nicholas Blanford, Beirut, December 2011.

government hobble through, while Iraq and Lebanon may serve as crucial trade release valves as the pressure on Syria continues to build.[54]

Furthermore, the Syrian uprising is becoming increasingly widespread, better coordinated, and more violent, as it pitches government forces into battle with an expanding guerrilla force known as the Syrian Free Army (SFA). The SFA, however, continues to face three major obstacles: (1) it lacks the ability to hold territory as a strategic base of operations without a supply of significant external materiel support; (2) the regime's army divisions remain largely intact as defections have not been large enough to have a significant impact; and (3) the internal cohesion of the SFA is questionable as the rebel forces resemble roaming armed bands or militias, assembled along ethnic or confessional lines rather than as a unified rebel force. These challenges, coupled with the international community's general lack of interest, or even ability, given Russian and Chinese intransigence, to engage in another intervention after Libya, make it likely that the domestic struggle for Syria will continue for quite some time to come.

There is also a legitimate fear that the escalating conflict in Syria could disrupt the fragile peace currently holding in Lebanon. Political allegiances in Lebanon roughly fall along either pro- or anti-Syrian lines. As stated above, the current power structure in Lebanon is decidedly pro-Syria. In addition, renewed ethnic tensions among the different sectarian communities are on the rise again, and the increasing flow of Syrian refugees fleeing the conflict across the border into Lebanon will only continue to exacerbate this problem. It is, however, unlikely that Syria will be able to spark a crisis by stirring up its armed group allies given its decline in power.

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[54] Will Fulton, Robert Frasco, and Ariel Farrar-Wellman, "Syria-Iran Foreign Relations," *American Enterprise Institute Iran Tracker*, August 15, 2011, http://www.irantracker.org/foreign-relations/syria-iran-foreign-relations. See also "Iraq, Siding with Iran, Sends Essential Aid to Syria's Assad," *Washington Post*, October 8, 2011, http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/iraq-siding-with-iran-sends-lifeline-to-assad/2011/10/06/gIQAFEAIWL_story.html.

# RECOMMENDATIONS

Given the above, there are several steps that the international community as a whole, and the United States and its NATO allies in particular, should take to further reduce Syrian power in the region and increase the pressure on the Assad regime. Essentially, these recommendations fall along two principal lines of action: (1) seek to increase the pressure on Syria's allies in an effort to weaken or break them entirely; or (2) co-opt the threat and thereby marginalize it.

## INCREASE THE PRESSURE: SHORE UP THE EASTERN FRONT

The best way to apply pressure to the Lebanese armed groups is to bolster the capacity of both the LAF and UNIFIL. Armed groups rely on both the weakness of their host states and the supply from their supporting states for their survival and prosperity, and the Palestinian rejectionist groups and Hizballah are no different. They clearly depend on both the inability of the Lebanese government to assert control over its territory and on their access to their state suppliers, Syria and Iran. The United States, therefore, has the ability to help alter the security landscape in Lebanon significantly by working to shore up the Lebanese-Syrian border and bolster the capacity of the LAF. The defense of the Syrian-Lebanese border—particularly the vital route through the Bekaa Valley, but also along the more obvious Damascus-Beirut highway—would substantially reduce, if not block, most transfer and communication between Syria and its armed group agents. Short of direct intervention, the United States has two basic options: significantly bolster the LAF or seek to broaden UNIFIL's mandate.

### *Increased Aid and Cooperation with the LAF*

The United States currently gives approximately $100 million in annual military aid to the LAF. This relatively small sum (31 times less than U.S. military aid to Israel) has proven to be relatively successful in expanding the reach and strength of the LAF. But the LAF needs more. Bolstering a state's capacity in the face of an armed group challenge worked in the past when the United States substantially reinforced the Jordanian army during its 1970 civil conflict with the PLO, and it can work again in Lebanon with a sustained and high-level commitment.

### *Expanding UNIFIL's Role*

The United States and its allies could use the current crisis in Syria to expand UNIFIL's zone of operations and boost its force capacity by changing its status to a Chapter 7 authorized mission. Expanding and strengthening UNIFIL could be viewed as a humanitarian imperative as the already problematic flow of refugees will likely only increase. It would also increase the monitoring and patrol of the Lebanese border with Syria. This option has the added benefit of sidestepping a likely Russian or Chinese veto in the Security Council to any form of direct intervention in Syria.

## INCREASE THE PRESSURE: BY LAND AND BY SEA

The United States and NATO should cooperate to increase their maritime presence in the waters off the coast of Lebanon and Syria. NATO already maintains Operation Active Endeavour as a deterrent to terrorist activity in the Mediterranean. Since 2003 NATO has used this operation to board and search suspect ships. Active Endeavour should be reinforced and direct more of its efforts to the littoral expanses of Syria and Lebanon.

Coupled with an increased capacity of the LAF within Lebanon, an international effort to monitor and interdict illegal arms shipments seeking water entry into the country would help seal off one of the remaining supply routes. Although this course of action will likely run into Russian resistance because the Russian navy is seeking to bolster its presence in the Eastern Mediterranean by refurbishing a base in the Syrian port Tartus, Russian presence in the area is still too weak to be a significant resistance.

## CO-OPT THE THREAT: NO QUARTER—ALLIED QUARTER

If Hamas officially shifts its headquarters outside of Syria, the United States and its allies should pressure other Arab states not to give quarter to the newly homeless organization. The same policy should be followed if any other groups follow suit. Depriving these groups of an organizational base of operations outside of Lebanon and the Occupied Territories would isolate them even further.

Alternatively, the United States could use Hamas's search for a new operational safe haven as a means of exerting influence on the group by persuading an ally far from the Israeli border to take the group in. Persuading Turkey, which continues to assert its power and influence among the Arab states, to house Hamas may best curb the group's influence and force reconciliation with Fatah. In general, closer attention to the funding

and hosting of these groups will likely not reduce Syrian potential to manipulate the region's sensitive security balances, but it may contribute to a lasting peace and stability in Lebanon.

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