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Lebanese Hezbollah's Experience in Syria

Mazen Ezzi

**Wartime and Post-Conflict in
Syria (WPCS)**

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European University Institute
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Lebanese Hezbollah's Experience in Syria

*Mazen Ezzi**

* Mazen Ezzi is a research contributor working on the Wartime and Post-Conflict in Syria project (WPCS) within the Middle East Directions Programme of the Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies at the European University Institute in Florence. Ezzi's work focuses on the war economy in Syria and the areas under regime control.

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Table of Contents

Executive Summary	1
Introduction	2
1. The Significance and Function of Hezbollah's Military Deployment in Syria	3
1.1. Syrian Shia Organisations in Areas of Shia Settlement and Displacement	4
<i>Syrian Hezbollah</i>	4
<i>Key Militias in Hezbollah's Orbit Operating in Damascus</i>	6
1.2. The Syrian-Lebanese Border: Protecting Supply Lines	8
1.3. South Syria: Security Presence and the Israeli Threat	9
2. Hezbollah's Economic Activities and Geographical Variations	10
2.1. Smuggling across the Syrian-Lebanese Border	10
2.2. Drug Dealing	12
2.3. Real Estate Trade and Demographic Change	13
3. Networks of Social Relations as Means of Control	15
3.1. Shia Religious Bodies and the Spread of Shiism	15
3.2. Integration in Local Communities	16
Conclusion	18

Executive Summary

The purpose and nature of the deployment of Lebanon's Hezbollah ('Party of God') in Syria vary from one region to another in accordance with the strategic importance of the region to the party. Similarly, the way in which the party builds its alliances and relations with local communities and state institutions also varies according to the region. Hezbollah has focused on the Syrian-Lebanese border zone and southern Syria through a direct presence there or through security cells and Syrian proxy militias. However, it has also worked to create a large umbrella for Syrian Shia militias. These are known as Syrian Hezbollah and exist predominantly within the Shia areas of Damascus, Homs and Aleppo. The inclusion of these militias within the ranks of the Syrian Arab Army (SAA) in the form of Local Defence Forces (LDFs) has provided an opportunity for the party to strengthen its influence over the Syrian military establishment.

As Hezbollah's engagement in the war evolved, it began to explore the economic prospects of its political-military influence and started sponsoring economic activities such as smuggling and drug trafficking to finance its operations in Syria. It took advantage of its control over the Syrian-Lebanese border to monopolise the smuggling of goods. With its local partner, the SAA's 4th Armoured Division, it also sponsored the opening of the al-Dimass market to supply areas under regime control with various goods that the Syrian market lacked. In addition, it used its military and security networks to market drugs produced in Lebanon in the domestic Syrian market and to smuggle them to Jordan and from there to the Gulf. The party then invested a proportion of the revenue generated in financing various activities, including purchases of land in places such as the town of al-Qusayr in the Homs countryside and the Sayyidah Zaynab area south of Damascus.

Hezbollah is strengthening its position, influence and sustainability in Syria, creating what may be described as a network of social relations not limited to the Shia community in Syria. Under Iranian auspices, it is working to carry out an integrated social, cultural and economic project in Syria. The comparatively small size of Syria's Shia community has obliged it to explore new options, including attempting to encourage conversions to Shiism and making use of relations and ties with local and tribal dignitaries, with whom the party works to annex them to its network of patronage.

Introduction

Hezbollah began its military intervention in Syria in the early days of the Syrian revolution, in March 2011, in the form of consultations with the regime's armed forces and security agencies. In addition, groups from its foreign elite Unit 910 intervened directly on the ground in both Daraa and Damascus. As the death toll of members killed carrying out what the party called their 'jihadist duty' in Syria grew, it was compelled to officially announce its military participation in May 2013, shortly before its first offensive against the opposition in an urban environment, in the town of al-Qusayr in the Homs countryside. At the time, the party's Secretary-General Hassan Nasrallah justified the military intervention by saying "Syria is the backbone of the Resistance. If Syria falls into the hands of the Americans, Israelis, *takfiris* and America's proxies in the region, the Resistance will be surrounded and Israel will enter Lebanon to impose its conditions on it" and pursue its goals anew. "If Syria falls," he added, "Palestine is lost."¹

According to these statements, the party intervened to prevent the fall of the Syrian regime, secure the overland transit of weapons to the party from Iran and protect its forces' training camps and weapons stores in Syria. However, the seven years that have since elapsed have transformed Hezbollah from being a local Lebanese player into a regional force capable of sending combat units to fight on foreign soil in the manner of a formal army in the service of goals no longer necessarily related to 'resisting' Israel or confronting regional alliances. Despite this, the party's intervention has cost it dearly, both militarily and politically.

Typically, the variation in Hezbollah's *modus operandi* in different areas in Syria is explained according to the strategic and geopolitical goals it seeks to achieve through its military intervention.² This paper adopts an approach that starts by analysing developments on the ground to explain the party's different behaviour according to its different strategic and geopolitical goals. The study also seeks to draw a new map of the party's position in Syria – militarily, economically and culturally. It thus examines how Hezbollah has developed its tools to maintain a long-term presence in Syria, even though this presence has led to the creation of what might be described as an independent project led by Shiites in Syria under the name of Syrian Hezbollah. Furthermore, the paper addresses the features of the economically and socially integrated project that the party is seeking to implement in Syria.

The research for this study involved 16 interviews conducted between October 2019 and January 2020 with fellow researchers, specialists and journalists following Hezbollah's activities in Syria, the collation and analysis of a large number of relevant articles, verifying the information they contained by comparing it with public online sources and a personal archive. Reference was also made to the relevant available literature to lay out the general framework for the research and formulate its central questions.³

¹ Islamic Resistance, "Sayyed Nasrallah to the Resistance Audiences: I Promise You Victory Again" (in Arabic), 27 May 2013, <https://bit.ly/37qXkSG>.

² Marisa Sullivan, "Hezbollah in Syria," *Institute for the Study of War*, April 2014. Also see Mohanad Hage Ali, "Power Points Defining the Syria-Hezbollah Relationship," *Carnegie Middle East Centre*, 7 May 2019, <https://bit.ly/2UY4wmE>.

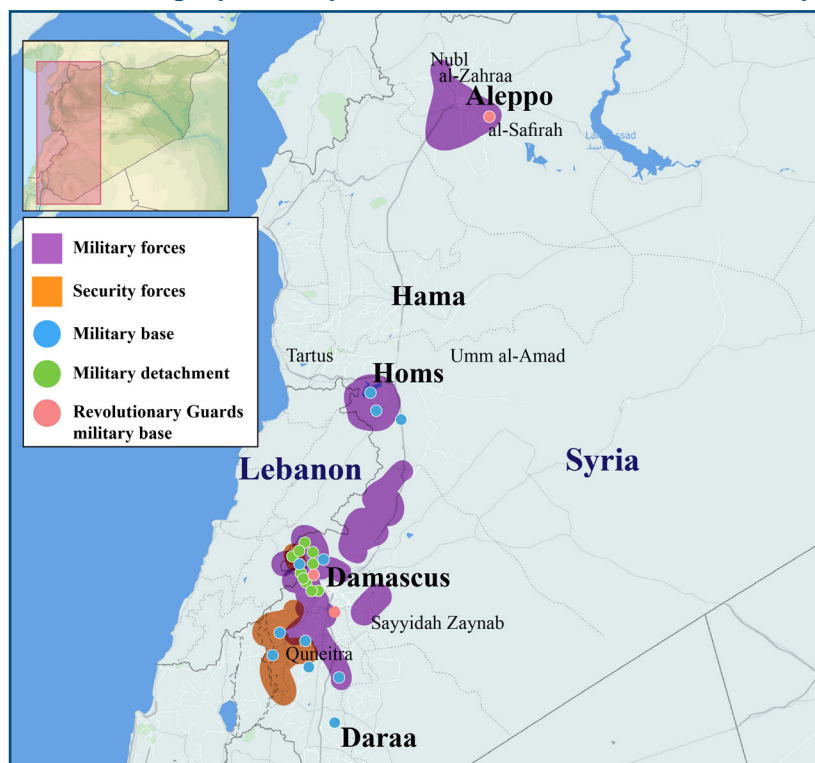
³ Waddah Sharara, *The State of Hezbollah: Lebanon as an Islamic Society* (in Arabic), (Beirut: Dar Al-Nahar, 2006); Joseph Daher, *The Political Economy of Hezbollah in Lebanon* (Pluto Publications, 2016).

1. The Significance and Function of Hezbollah's Military Deployment in Syria

The nature of Hezbollah's presence in Syria varies according to the area and its function. The party has created a network of Syrian Shia militias known as Syrian Hezbollah. It has managed incoming Iraqi Shia militias and deployed its forces alongside Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) to provide it with protection and to mediate between it and the Syrians. In addition, the party has trained and directed a network of proxy militias⁴ incorporated within the National or Local Defence Forces and regime forces. It has deployed its own forces in certain strategic areas, in which it has established military bases, observation points and security groups.

It is difficult to distinguish the boundaries of pro-Iranian militia operations in Syria, but Hezbollah has noticeably operated in three key areas: in the main Shia settlement areas; in southern Syria; and on the Syrian-Lebanese border. This division is based on the different forms of the party's presence, which correspond to its military, economic and cultural objectives in each particular region. By contrast, Hezbollah's presence in eastern Syria remains relatively weak as there it is subject to direct Iranian management through the IRGC.⁵ In Aleppo the mixed presence of Hezbollah and the IRGC presents a unique experience. The party's military deployment there appears to complement and protect the IRGC, which has established its largest and most fortified strategic base in Syria in Jabal Azzan, which is relatively far from direct Israeli pursuit despite it having been struck by Israel in early 2019. Hezbollah command centres and the joint Hezbollah-IRGC operations room are located in the military academy and three military colleges in Aleppo's western neighbourhood alongside Iranian observation points.⁶

Map 1. Key Areas of Deployment by Lebanese Hezbollah and Allied Syrian Militias



Source: Interviews conducted by the researcher

⁴ These proxy militias are pro-regime militias within the National or Local Defence Forces. Their members come from various sectarian and ethnic backgrounds and are not necessarily Shia.

⁵ Ziad Awad, "Iran in Deir ez-Zor: Strategy, Expansion and Opportunities," Research Project Report (Florence, Italy: European University Institute), 7 October 2019, <http://bit.ly/38NfJfJ>.

⁶ WhatsApp interview with journalist Khaled al-Khatib, 23 December 2019.

1.1. Syrian Shia Organisations in Areas of Shia Settlement and Displacement

Syrian Hezbollah

Since the start of 2012, Hezbollah has established an exclusive umbrella for its proxy Shia militias known as Syrian Hezbollah. However, this formation has faced several crises. Even though the Syrian Shia community has been subject to large-scale militarisation since 2011, no unified Syrian Hezbollah leadership has been formed. This is due to the small size of the sect, which before 2011 represented around 1 to 2 percent of the population, its geographical dispersion and the diversity of its local and cultural references. In effect, Syrian Hezbollah comprises Syrian Shia militias operating under Lebanese leadership, or sometimes Syrians trained in Iran and affiliated with the Lebanese leadership.⁷ Owing to Lebanon's geographical proximity to Syria and Hezbollah's close social ties with Syria's Shia community, the party has been able to maintain direct control over its Syrian offshoots.⁸

Syrian Hezbollah is mainly deployed in Syria's Shia areas, where it provides Shiites with protection given that they have actively participated in regime and Hezbollah military operations outside their home regions. However, the demographic changes witnessed during the Syrian war have led to a redeployment of some of these militias. For example, most Shia residents in al-Fouaa and Kefraya in Idlib moved to Sayyidah Zaynab in Damascus after they were evacuated under the 'four-towns agreement.'⁹ The same happened as a result of the heavy Shia displacement from Nubl and al-Zahraa in the Aleppo countryside. In Daraa, the party initially focused its presence on the Shia of Busra,¹⁰ but a large proportion of them moved to Sayyidah Zaynab when the opposition took control of Busra in 2015. As for Hama and the Mediterranean coast, Syrian Hezbollah is deployed among small groups of Alawite converts to Shiism, while its efforts to form a militia in the Druze Sweida governorate bore no fruit. In contrast, the al-Baqir Brigade in the Aleppo countryside is a special case for Syrian Hezbollah in that it mainly consists of a branch of the Sunni Baqqara clan, which converted to Shiism.

It should be mentioned that all the Shia militias established by Hezbollah in Syria follow the Iranian *wilayat al-faqih* ('guardianship of the Islamic jurist') ideology, and their flags carry the Hezbollah insignia, including a raised arm, rifle and globe. In general, the militias created by Hezbollah in Syria are all broadly similar. They are led by Lebanese Shia clerics and to a lesser extent by Syrian and Iraqi clerics, each of them known as *Hajj*. They comprise Syrian members organised in brigades, factions and companies.

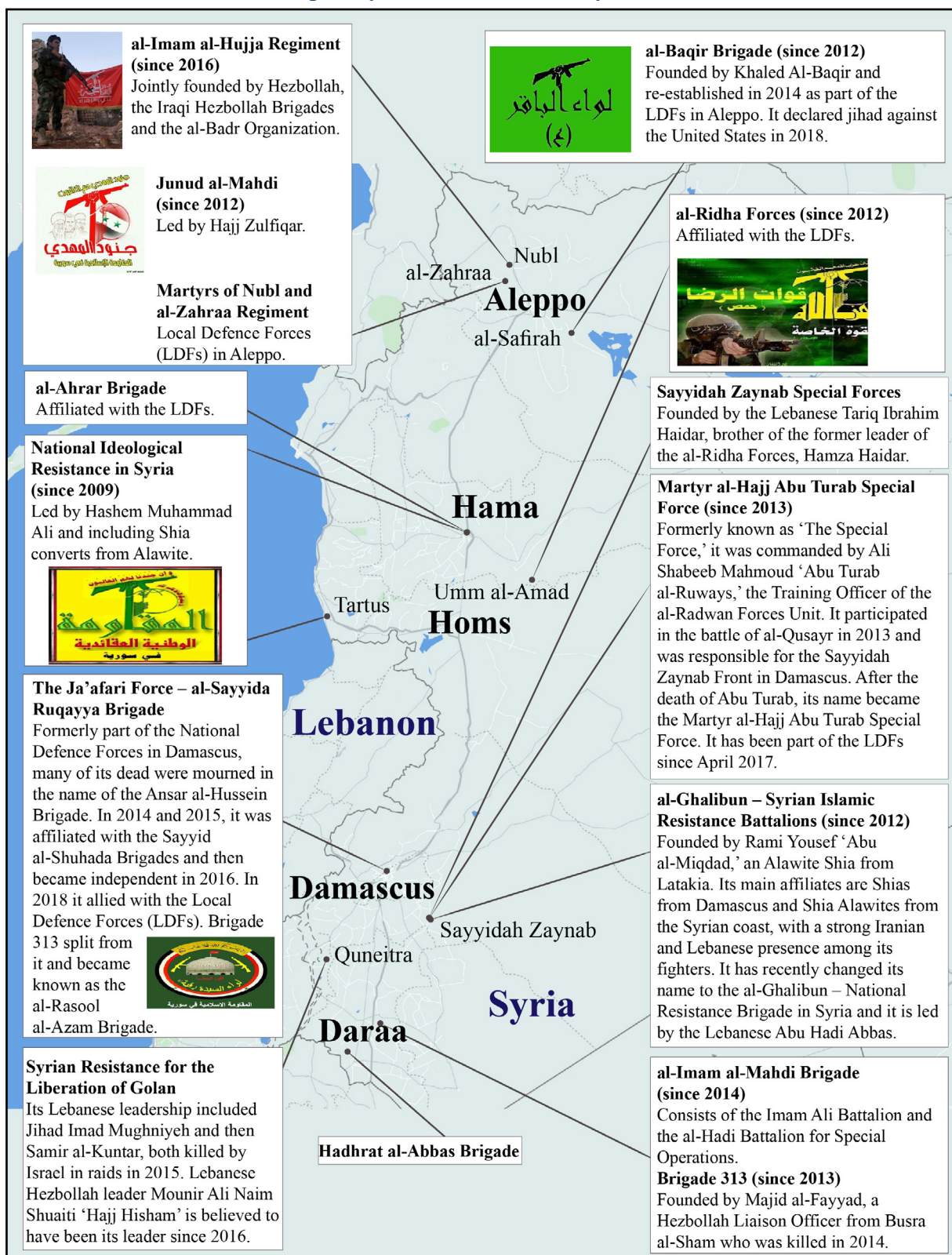
⁷ WhatsApp interview with Mohanad Hage Ali, a researcher at the Carnegie Middle East Institute, 13 December 2019.

⁸ Phillip Smyth, "Lebanese Hezbollah's Islamic Resistance in Syria," *The Washington Institute*, 26 April 2018, <http://bit.ly/2IF5FbE>.

⁹ This agreement was signed in April 2017 between Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham, Ahrar al-Sham and the IRGC. It stipulated that fighters and inhabitants of Madaya and al-Zabadani in western Damascus who refused to stay would be evacuated to the north in exchange for the full evacuation of Kefraya and al-Fouaa in two waves and the release of 1,500 detainees from the regime's prisons. Enab Baladi, "The File of 'Four Cities' is Closed with the Evacuation of Kefraya and al-Fouaa" (in Arabic), 19 July 2018 <https://bit.ly/37cFXoR>.

¹⁰ Prior to 2011, the population of Daraa totalled one million, including about 10,000 Shia scattered through the villages and cities of Busra al-Sham, Izraa, Sheikh Maskin, Ghabaghib, Muthabeen, Tafas, Bir al-Sabil and Alqin.

Map 2. Syrian Hezbollah's Key Militias



Source: Interviews conducted by the researcher, public online sources, social media and Aymenn Jawad al-Tamimi's blog¹¹

There are some indications that the Syrian Shia community resents the Lebanese party's dominance over its decisions, not to mention its sensitivity over the inequality between Syrians and the Lebanese. The most prominent example of this is a leaked document issued in February 2017 by the "Emergency Committee to Address the Situation of Our People in Homs," which is affiliated with the al-Ridha

¹¹ Aymenn Jawad al-Tamimi's blog, <https://bit.ly/3cftB2S>

Forces, the Syrian Hezbollah branch in the villages of Umm al-Amad and its surroundings in the Homs countryside. The document refers to the arrogance with which the Lebanese *Hajjs* deal with their Syrian counterparts, injustice against the Syrian militia regarding the salaries of its members, their security, military and social statuses, and their lack of “access to the Syrian state commensurate with their sacrifices.”¹²

Several analyses have interpreted the leaked document as an implicit rejection by the Syrian regime of Hezbollah’s growing influence and a call to contain and curtail Syrian Hezbollah militias within the regime’s forces.¹³ Behind this interpretation is an increased importance that analysts have given to the role in founding the al-Ridha forces of the Lebanese Hezbollah leader, Hamza Ibrahim Haidar, who was killed in the Khalidiya district of Homs in 2013.¹⁴ However, the actual founder, who continues to lead them as an ideological organisation that espouses *wilayat al-faqih* and unites the Syrian Shia militiamen was the regime’s Colonel Zeineddine under the supervision of Hezbollah.¹⁵ This contradiction in the al-Ridha forces from their very foundation is analogous to that of the Syrian Hezbollah, which serves two masters at once – the Lebanese Hezbollah and the Syrian state –, combining the Shia jihadist mentality committed to *wilayat al-faqih* with a concern for the ‘dear homeland’ and the Syrian Arab Army.¹⁶

In fact, the relationship between the two parties is further clarified in the secret document leaked in April 2017.¹⁷ The document refers to the incorporation of Iranian militias in Syria in the Local Defence Forces ensuring that the relationship between “civilian and military Syrians in the forces operating with the Iranian side” is organised. It is noteworthy that the total number of these forces is 88,733 fighters and that the “Iranian side” is responsible for “combat and material insurance of all kinds” and for “securing the material rights of the martyrs, the wounded and the missing.”¹⁸

All of the Syrian pro-Iranian militias, including Syrian Hezbollah, are on the Syrian Ministry of Defence’s records. This does not mean, however, that Syrian Hezbollah is annexed to the Syrian army and its ‘national ideology’ but that there is additional Iranian expansion within Syrian sovereign institutions

Key Militias in Hezbollah’s Orbit Operating in Damascus

Lebanese Hezbollah has maintained a direct presence in Sayyidah Zaynab south of Damascus in addition to Syrian Shia militia formations composed of those who were displaced there and which now make up, along with foreigners, more than 70 percent of its population. Despite Sayyidah Zaynab being a densely populated residential area, the party has established weapons armouries, intelligence centres, operations rooms and prisons there. Dozens of Shia militias are based there. They are closely related to Hezbollah, which is alone responsible for protecting the Sayyidah Zaynab shrine.¹⁹

In contrast to the closed zone of Sayyidah Zaynab, Hezbollah leaves the al-Shaghour neighbourhood – the Damascene Shia centre – open to the public without checkpoints, although its security is

¹² Al-Modon, “Al-Ridha Militias: The Two-Fold Sensitivity towards the Regime and Hezbollah” (in Arabic), 22 April 2017 <https://bit.ly/2vjqPsp>.

¹³ Hage Ali, “Power Points Defining the Syria-Hezbollah Relationship”

¹⁴ Aymenn Jawad al-Tamimi, “Quwat Al-Ridha: Syrian Hezbollah,” *Aymenn Jawad al-Tamimi Blog*, 31 July 2015 <https://bit.ly/37igY46>.

¹⁵ WhatsApp interview with Colonel Ismail Ayoub, 6 January 2020.

¹⁶ Al-Modon, “Al-Ridha Militias”, *ibid*.

¹⁷ A proposal issued by the Organisation and Administration Directorate and Arming Branch, signed and approved by the Commander-in-Chief of the Army and Armed Forces, Bashar al-Assad.

¹⁸ Al-Modon, “How are Iranian Militias Integrated within the Forces of the Regime?” (in Arabic), 4 May 2017 <https://bit.ly/2Ro9s1Z>.

¹⁹ WhatsApp interview with journalist Raed al-Salhani, 24 December 2019.

maintained from an operations room that runs a network of surveillance cameras distributed around the old Damascus neighbourhoods and the vicinity of the Sayyidah Ruqayya shrine and the Umayyad Mosque. The Sayyidah Zaynab model, however, has been adopted in the vicinity of the Ruqayya shrine in Damascus, which is considered a closed security area in which multinational Shia militias are deployed to protect Shia pilgrims at the shrine and the Bab al-Saghir cemetery. Also located near the Ruqayya shrine are Hezbollah's headquarters and light weapons depot, with armed men wearing the Iranian Basij militia insignia. Hezbollah has closed off the al-Bahsa area, home to Shia pilgrims, and uses it to hold security and military meetings of its militias' top brass.²⁰

Table 1. Key Militias in Hezbollah's Orbit Operating in Damascus

Name of Militia	Year of Foundation	Current Area of Operations	Notes
Sayyid al-Shuhada Brigades	2013	Damascus	Founded by the Iraqi Fateh al-Khazali as a military front in Syria for the Sayyid al-Shuhada Movement. It was joined by the Ja'afari force al-Sayyida Ruqayyah Brigade in late 2014 and then by Asadullah al-Ghalib in 2016.
Abu al-Fadl al-Abbas Brigade	2013	Sayyidah Zaynab / Damascus	The first network of Shia militias in Syria. It worked for a period of time in the National Defence Forces. It is led by the Syrian Maher Ajeeb Jatha – 'Abu Ajeeb' – from Nubl in Aleppo. In different periods it included the al-Imam al-Hussein Brigade, the Zulfiqar Brigade and the Asadullah al-Ghalib Brigade. It currently belongs to the 1421th Battalion of the 104th Republican Guards Brigade.
Zulfiqar Brigade	2013	Sayyidah Zaynab / Damascus	An Iraqi brigade that added "Defender of the Holy Sites in Iraq and the Levant" to its name after the fall of Mosul into the hands of the Islamic State organisation. It was responsible for the al-Nabak massacre in 2013. It is led by Abu Shahd al-Juburi under the banner of the Republican Guards 104 Brigade Infantry.
al-Imam al-Hussein Brigade	2012	Sayyidah Zaynab / Damascus	According to the records, it is affiliated with the 4th Division. It maintains a relationship with the al-Sadr group in Iraq. It is led by the Iraqi Asaad al-Bahadali, who succeeded his brother Amjad al-Bahadali.
Asadullah al-Ghalib Brigade	2013	Damascus	Includes Iraqi advisers from Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq and has a recruitment network in Iraq, where it established a branch in 2014. In January 2016, it announced that it had joined the Iraqi al-Abdal Movement, which is linked to the Sayyid al-Shuhada Brigade and the Badr Organisation in Iraq.
Ammar bin Yasir Brigade		Damascus and Aleppo	A Syrian front for the Iraqi Nujaba Hezbollah Movement. Also known as al-Nujaba. Most of its fighters are from al-Fouaa, Kefraya and Shias of Damascus.
al-Wa'ad al-Sadiq ['Sincere Promise'] Forces	2012	Sayyidah Zaynab / Damascus	Special Operation Group commanded on the field by Syrians. It has not appeared recently.
Rapid Intervention Regiment		Sayyidah Zaynab / Damascus	Iraqi.
Hurras al-Maqam ['Guardians of The Shrine']	2013	Sayyidah Ruqayya / Damascus	Composed of Syrian, Iraqi and Lebanese members. It takes charge of protecting the surroundings of the Ruqayya and Zaynab shrines in Damascus.

Source: Interviews conducted by the researcher, public online sources, social media and Aymenn Jawad al-Tamimi's blog

²⁰ WhatsApp interview with journalist Raed al-Salhani, 24 December 2019.

It should be noted that the first militias deployed in Damascus were branches of Iraqi militias that espouse *wilayat al-faqih*, which Hezbollah contributed to forming after the US invasion of Iraq in 2003. These included Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq and the al-Nujaba Movement. At first, these militias included some Iraqi members but they soon recruited Syrian Shia in their various areas of deployment. The concentration of the militias in Damascus and its southern countryside was in proportion to concentrated waves of Syrian Shia displacement there. Moreover, these militias witnessed continual reconfiguration, splits and mergers until they generally consisted of Shia Syrians at both the rank-and-file and leadership levels.

1.2. The Syrian-Lebanese Border: Protecting Supply Lines

Hezbollah initially declared that its intervention in Syria was aimed at protecting dual Lebanese-Syrian citizens living in certain border villages on the outskirts of the town of al-Qusayr in the Homs countryside.²¹ However, the party quickly expanded its deployment across the entirety of the Lebanese-Syrian border zone, which became a cordon in which the party maintained a presence of its official forces led by Lebanese *Hajjs* and bolstered at the rank-and-file level by local Syrian members.

Hezbollah has recently begun to focus its presence in Qalamoun, where it maintains roads, tunnels and armouries which are considered relatively safe due to the rugged mountainous terrain that protects them from Israeli raids and their distance from urban centres, which reduces the chance of being spied on. The lack of a Russian presence in the area is an additional factor. Hezbollah constitutes more than half of the total military manpower in Western Qalamoun and 20 percent of the total forces in Eastern Qalamoun,²² where there is also an IRGC base in al-Nasriyah which Hezbollah is deployed to protect.²³

As for Western Ghouta and the Syrian-Lebanese border area, the party focuses on the intelligence role of Syrians in its ranks gaining information on opposition groups and activities against it. Hezbollah's grip is strong in Western Ghouta, where it shares some sites with the regime's 4th Division. It is noteworthy that the party is still preventing residents from returning to some locations in western al-Zabadani, which is considered a security zone.²⁴

In the town of al-Qusayr and its surroundings in the Homs countryside near the Syrian-Lebanese border, Hezbollah has military bases, weapons depots and training camps for its members. On 19 May 2013, it launched a military campaign in al-Qusayr with the support of the Syrian air force against the opposition in the town, seizing it after seventeen days of fighting. As the link between the Lebanese Bekaa Valley and Homs in Syria, al-Qusayr was the entrance from which Hezbollah forces began their direct military intervention in Syria, allowing for control over the area between Damascus and the Syrian coast. The road from Beirut to Tehran passes through it too, via Palmyra in the Syrian desert and from there to al-Bukamal on the Syrian-Iraqi border.

Al-Qusayr's importance to Hezbollah was demonstrated by it holding there its only public military parade on the occasion of its 'Martyr's Day' in November 2016. Hundreds of its fighters and the armoured regiment participated. Hezbollah believes that its control over al-Qusayr has turned it into a cross-border army.²⁵ There does not appear to be much likelihood of al-Qusayr's displaced residents returning in the foreseeable future, given the damage to their homes and the fact the area is 'militarily occupied.' Hezbollah owns the most prominent military base in the area, namely the Dabaa military airfield, where small military cargo planes sometimes land.²⁶

²¹ Hage Ali, "Power Points Defining the Syria-Hezbollah Relationship".

²² Survey conducted by the researcher with journalists from the Sawt al-Asima network.

²³ Skype interview with journalist Ahmad al-Shami, 17 December 2019.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Al-Jazeera, "Hezbollah's First Military Parade in Syria" (in Arabic), 14 November 2016, <https://bit.ly/37u7Qto>.

²⁶ Interview with Colonel Ismail Ayoub, *ibid*.

1.3. South Syria: Security Presence and the Israeli Threat

Hezbollah's presence in Daraa, Quneitra, the 'Triangle of Death'²⁷ and the southern Damascus countryside reflects the importance it attaches to this strategic area, which constitutes an access point for it to the Syrian-Israeli border, giving it an opportunity to pose a threat to Israel. This is why the party established bases and fixed training camps east of the Damascus-Amman international highway. It has also infiltrated both the western Daraa countryside and Quneitra with security groups from the region in what appears to be only a perfunctory commitment to Russian-Israeli agreements to remove Iran's militias 80 km from the Syrian-Israeli border. It is reported that these sites have been subjected to repeated Israeli raids since the end of 2018.

In addition, Hezbollah has worked at forming numerous groups from the Shia remaining in Daraa, such as Saraya al-Areen 313 ('Brigades of Den 313'), which is composed of Busra Shia, the al-Imam al-Mahdi Brigade, comprising Shia from Busra, Qarfa and al-Sheikh Maskin,²⁸ and the Hadhart Abbas Brigade, active in Izraa. After the displacement of the Busra Shia to Sayyidah Zaynab in Damascus, the relatively small numbers of Shia remaining in southern Syria led the party to rely on proxy militias such as the Golan Regiment, which was formerly an opposition group known as the Mu'tasim Billah Division and later affiliated with the Syrian Republican Guards after a settlement with the regime in 2014. Since the reconciliation agreement in mid-2018, Hezbollah has amassed around 2,500 local fighters in Daraa and Quneitra, mostly under the leadership of Lebanese *Hajjs*. Most of these troops were previously opposition fighters.²⁹

Hezbollah has also established four large fixed military bases in the southern region – three in Daraa and one in Quneitra – to serve as training and preparation centres for new volunteers and arms and ammunition depots. Hezbollah also works to form combat groups and security cells manned by the people of the region. Their tasks are to monitor Israeli forces on the other side of the border fence and to train and prepare for operations against them.³⁰ These cells are also responsible for gathering intelligence on 'reconciled' former opposition factions, pursuing opponents of the Iranian presence and targeting people who have previously dealt with Israel.³¹ For example, the Air Force Intelligence arrested Khalil Hleihil, the commander of what was known as the al-Sobtain Brigade, who previously operated under the banner of the Syrian Revolutionary Front (SRF). Months later in late 2018, he was released on condition that he formed a group in al-Rafid on the border with the Golan Heights to monitor the border. Information provided by the Hleihil group led in late 2018 to the assassination of the former SRF leader, Ibrahim al-Aar, who was accused of dealing with Israel.³²

Since mid-2018, Hezbollah's heavy military presence in the 'Triangle of Death' has become an attempt to perpetuate a balance of deterrence with Israel. The party has installed there a medium-range surface-to-surface missile base, drone launchers and anti-aircraft missile bases, in addition to military bases in Tulul Fatima, Tall al-Shaar, Tall Ghareen and Tall al-Shaham. Hezbollah circumvents the Russian-Israeli agreement by deploying within the regime's 90th Brigade. The Fatimiyoun Brigade, al-Radwan Forces and Mahdi al-Shirazi missile forces are also active in the Triangle of Death.³³

²⁷ The area is located at the intersection of the southern governorates of Damascus, Daraa and Quneitra. It was named the Triangle of Death after the heavy losses suffered there by the Afghan Fatimiyoun Brigade in 2015.

²⁸ Aymenn Jawad al-Tamimi, "Liwa al-Imam al-Mahdi: A Syrian Hezbollah Formation," *Aymenn Jawad al-Tamimi Blog*, 23 July 2016, <https://bit.ly/30MBk39>.

²⁹ Skype interview with an informed source who asked to remain anonymous, 27 December 2019.

³⁰ Recruitment in the border region of the Golan extended to some of the Druze in the town of Hader and the Sunni al-Naeem clan close to Hezbollah due to it having Shia members.

³¹ WhatsApp interview with journalist Samir al-Saadi, 14 December 2019.

³² WhatsApp interview with an informed source who asked to remain anonymous, 13 February 2020.

³³ WhatsApp interview with journalist Sebastian al-Hamdan, 8 December 2019.

On the other hand, the presence of the IRGC increases as one moves north toward Damascus. Five years ago, in al-Kiswah south of Damascus the IRGC established one of its largest underground military bases in Syria, in an area affiliated with the regime's 1st Armoured Division which was subjected to many Israeli raids. Hezbollah is extensively deployed in the region to secure protection of the Iranian base.³⁴ It has even moved much of its heavy weaponry towards Tall al-Mana, near the base.

On 3 January 2020 in Baghdad, the US assassinated the leader of the Iranian al-Quds Force, Qassem Soleimani. After this, Hezbollah redeployed and distributed some of its forces to Daraa, Qalamoun, Western Ghouta and Damascus, replacing its banners with Syrian flags while its forces changed their positions within the same area and fortified them. The party was keen to not remain in one place for long. Instead, it periodically changed its positions and focused on digging tunnels and building underground sites. Most prominently, the party entered Jabadeen in western Qalamoun for the first time, where it was stationed in the Air Defence Forces' battalion with heavy machine guns and shoulder-mounted anti-aircraft weaponry.³⁵

2. Hezbollah's Economic Activities and Geographical Variations

Throughout its involvement in the Syrian war, Hezbollah has not hesitated to make use of the economic opportunities arising from it. It has worked to supplement its budget with independent revenue sources in the light of the financial crisis in Iran, its main financier, following the withdrawal of the United States from the nuclear deal in May 2018 and the consequent reactivation of sanctions. The party's commercial activities have developed and changed during the war, from selling light weapons to opposition forces,³⁶ to car trading in besieged areas, to buying weapons from the opposition after reconciliation and evacuation agreements.

The party has monopolised smuggling operations across the Syrian-Lebanese border in both directions. It also controls the drug trade in Syria and exports of drugs from there to Jordan and the Gulf. It has used some of the revenue from its illicit activities to finance purchases of land and real estate in two main areas of influence in Syria: al-Qusayr in the Homs countryside and the vicinity of Sayyidah Zaynab southeast of Damascus.

2.1. Smuggling across the Syrian-Lebanese Border

Since the 1980s, the Syrian-Lebanese border has been crossed to supply goods smuggled from Lebanon into the capital Damascus and central Syria³⁷ in the light of the Syrian government's restrictions on importing what it considered 'luxury' goods, including electrical appliances, tobacco, foodstuffs and medicines.³⁸ In the other direction, smuggling provided the Lebanese market with cheap Syrian food products such as vegetables, meat and fuel. Smuggling operations have continued since

³⁴ WhatsApp interview with journalist Sebastian al-Hamdan, 8 December 2019.

³⁵ Interview with Raed al-Salhani, *ibid*.

³⁶ Between 2013 and 2015 in the western countryside of Damascus and Qalamoun on the Syrian-Lebanese border, Hezbollah was the second-largest source of light weapons purchased by the opposition, with Syrian regime military officers being the first. Skype interview with Ahmed al-Shami, 16 December 2019. Also see Ali al-Amin, "Syria and Lebanon and The War Trade from Weapons to Drugs" (in Arabic), *al-Arab* 26 April 2016, <https://bit.ly/2OAifvX>.

³⁷ Elizabeth Picard, *Lebanon-Syria, Two Intimate Strangers: A Century of Socio-Political Interactions* (in French), (France: Sindbad Actes Sud, April 2016).

³⁸ In the 1980s smuggling operations were active concurrently with severe austerity policies which followed the decline in Gulf financing of the Assad regime – due to its pro-Iranian stance in the first Gulf War – and the subsequent US economic blockade.

the outbreak of the Lebanese civil war in 1975 and during the subsequent period of Syrian military intervention in Lebanon.³⁹ Syrian customs agents affiliated with the ministry of finance turned a blind eye to the main smuggling market in the town of Madaya in Western Ghouta in exchange for shares in the trade. From the July 2006 war to 2011, Hezbollah's participation in smuggling began to expand on the Lebanese side of the border, in partnership with the 4th Division and with military security on the Syrian side.⁴⁰ In 2019, the volume of smuggling trade to Syria from Lebanon was about 2.5 billion USD, according to official statements by Lebanon's then minister of defence.

Hezbollah controls the entire Syrian-Lebanese border strip, which extends 375 km and includes dozens of unofficial crossings. The party uses these crossings to move its forces and arms shipments, to provide the forces with logistical and military support and to supply areas under its control in Lebanon with Syrian goods and products without subjecting them to customs duty. The party also uses some crossings to support illicit economic activities, including smuggling people on both sides of the border.⁴¹

While most of the smuggled goods find their way from Lebanon to the markets in Syrian border towns for local distribution, the al-Dimass market in the western countryside of Damascus remains one of the most prominent examples of the vitality of smuggling operations, their centralisation and the local dynamics. Al-Dimass is 15 km from the Masnaa border crossing. The market was started there in 2012 in conjunction with Hezbollah isolating the cities of al-Zabadani and Madaya, which were the main markets for smuggled goods from Lebanon before 2011. While al-Zabadani and Madaya had been outside regime control since late 2011 and were then subjected to years of double siege by the regime and Hezbollah, al-Dimass and its surrounding towns, such as al-Saboura, Ras al-Ain and al-Jdaydah, did not witness an anti-regime movement. On the contrary, many of its residents volunteered in local groups affiliated with the 4th Division, military security and Hezbollah itself.

Since 2011, volunteers from the region in the 4th Division and Hezbollah have succeeded in transforming the al-Dimass market into a wholesale distribution centre for smuggled goods to various Syrian regions by setting up warehouses and stores, and preparing dozens of new stores with the increasing demand in the market. The smuggled goods include electrical appliances, food, clothing, fuel, cigarettes, spirits and car parts. The market was dominated by a group of families from the region known for their longstanding ties to Hezbollah. They include the Nakrash, al-Kurdi, al-Arsani, Abu Sabha and Talib families.

The 4th Division checkpoints impose on smugglers from Lebanon what is known as 'trunk customs,' an illegal fee depending on the type of goods in a car's load. It limits the smuggling trade to the al-Dimass merchants by being lax with them as they pay monthly royalties to sustain the 'partnership.' Merchants and industrialists in Damascus and its countryside have established ties with al-Dimass dealers to secure the raw materials needed to operate their facilities from Lebanon through a network of taxi drivers.⁴²

³⁹ Sanaa al-Jack, "Smuggling on the Border with Syria is Destroying the Lebanese Economy" (in Arabic), *al-sharq al-Awsat*, 20 May 2019 <https://bit.ly/2vWm9Jb>.

⁴⁰ Skype interview with an informed source who asked to remain anonymous, 7 February 2020.

⁴¹ Ahmad al-Shami, "Between Syria and Lebanon: Human Smuggling Increases Under the Auspices of the Fourth and Hezbollah" (in Arabic), *al-Modon* 20 March 2019 <https://bit.ly/2UWGdpp>.

⁴² Al-Modon, "Smuggling from Lebanon to Syria: The Fourth Division and 'Trunk Customs'" (in Arabic), 10 March 2019 <https://bit.ly/36zzWSt>.

In addition, the 4th Division secures the movement of goods in and out of al-Dimass market by means of cargo escorting or by ‘selling’ trade routes to merchants.⁴³ In fact, the 4th Division officers and influential Hezbollah officials eventually entered the al-Dimass market directly and ran their own warehouses and stores.⁴⁴ For example, in late 2015 the 4th Division and Hezbollah helped a merchant from the town of Madaya close to them, Abdo Ghalyoun, to establish a shipping company operating between Syria and Lebanon. No campaign has been carried out to combat smuggled goods in al-Dimass in the past three years, which have otherwise seen Syrian customs tighten their grip and pursue smuggled goods in the areas controlled by the regime.

However, the smuggling trend has recently begun to reverse after popular protests in Lebanon started in October 2019 in conjunction with the financial crisis and the difficulties in importing goods from Lebanon. Hezbollah has become concerned with supplying its populous areas in Lebanon with Syrian food commodities.⁴⁵

2.2. Drug Dealing

In recent years, Syria has become a major exporter and consumer of drugs and stimulants, as the war has increased the demand for them and an absence of legal prosecution has given way to producers and traders. The Syrian domestic production of cannabis and hashish is still only experimental and is sponsored by Hezbollah in the Hawran region, around al-Qusayr and in Talkalakh. Hezbollah plays a major role in supplying the Syrian market with drugs, relying on its historical cultivation in the Lebanese Bekaa Valley, which has not witnessed any drug destruction campaigns in recent years, contrary to what was the norm prior to 2011. In addition, the party uses Syrian refugees in Lebanon as a labour force in hashish farms, having recruited a large part of the Lebanese Shia labour force to fight in Syria.⁴⁶

It is difficult to estimate the quantities of drugs that Hezbollah supplies for domestic consumption in Syria or those designated for smuggling to Jordan and from there to the Gulf states. It is therefore difficult to estimate the percentage of the drug economy’s contribution to financing Hezbollah’s operations in Syria. Some analysts deem the percentage negligible, not exceeding 5 percent.⁴⁷ Other estimates based on monitoring the shipments of drugs which are intended for local consumption only that Hezbollah transports through the illegal crossings between Syria and Lebanon to the villages of Western Qalamoun indicate that the traffic ranges between 2 and 3 shipments a week, with a value of 1 million USD each.⁴⁸ It appears that the Syrian domestic market for drugs is worth an average of 96 million USD annually and is distributed over the various Syrian governorates, including areas controlled by the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), the so-called Euphrates Shield and Olive Branch areas controlled by Turkey, and Idlib. The size of this trade represents almost 12 percent of Hezbollah’s Iranian budget, which, according to Israeli estimates, amounted to 830 million USD in 2017.⁴⁹

These shipments consist primarily of hashish and Captagon and Hezbollah does not interfere in the local marketing and trading of these drugs. Instead, family militias in the villages of Fulaita and Qara in Western Qalamoun manage the business in return for a share in the distribution. In addition to the

⁴³ For more on the activities of the 4th Division, see Ayman Aldassouky, “The Economic Network of the Fourth Division During the Syrian Conflict,” Research Project Report (Florence, Italy: European University Institute), 13 January 2020, <http://bit.ly/2wSsBS9>.

⁴⁴ Interview with Ahmad al-Shami, *ibid*.

⁴⁵ Al-Modon, “The Syrian Coast: Is ‘Hezbollah’ Smuggling Food to Lebanon?” (in Arabic), 19 November 2019, <https://bit.ly/2tLvxPk>.

⁴⁶ Mazen Ezzi, “Hezbollah: Hashish Terrorism and Wars” (in Arabic), *al-Modon* 13 June 2016 <https://bit.ly/3aOPEfQ>.

⁴⁷ Skype interview with researcher Joseph Daher, 13 December 2019.

⁴⁸ WhatsApp interview with a tribal source from the region familiar with smuggling, 3 January 2020.

⁴⁹ Mohanad Hage Ali, “830 Million Dollars” (in Arabic), *al-Modon*, 25 September 2017, <https://bit.ly/2UtUgCF>.

Western Qalamoun road, Hezbollah smuggles drug shipments through two other routes: from the town of Serghaya on the Beirut-Damascus road and from the Shebaa and Rakhlah crossings in Mount Hermon.⁵⁰

As for drugs intended for smuggling to Jordan and Iraq and from there to the Persian Gulf, they pass along the Qalamoun road to the Syrian desert and then on to the perimeter of the al-Tanf area, or else across the Quneitra-Daraa line to the Jordanian border. Smuggling into Jordan increased after the re-opening of the Nasib-Jabir border crossing in October 2018, which has since been closed again several times due to the discovery of drug shipments intended for smuggling.⁵¹ Scarcely a week passed before the Jordanian authorities announced they had seized large quantities of drugs on their northern borders and destroyed them.⁵²

Moreover, in July 2019 the Greek authorities seized Captagon in what they described as the largest quantity of narcotics coming from Syria seized in the world, stating that it was worth more than half a billion euros.⁵³ Although there are local Captagon presses in more than one location in the countryside of Damascus and Daraa, the raw materials come from Lebanon along smuggling lines that are protected by Hezbollah and the 4th Division. The drug is intended for local production and consumption.⁵⁴ In addition, at the Hmeimim military base on the Syrian coast, where Russia has absolute control, Hezbollah is partnering with Russian officers in drug smuggling by sea through the port of Latakia to Russia, and possibly from there on to European markets.⁵⁵ According to the US Drug Enforcement Administration, Hezbollah has used its drug revenue to purchase weapons for its fighters on behalf of the Assad regime. A senior Hezbollah commander, Ali Fayyad, and one other person are believed to have made the purchases.⁵⁶

2.3. Real Estate Trade and Demographic Change

In addition to the areas controlled militarily by Hezbollah, the party's real estate interests are concentrated in two main areas: al-Qusayr in the Homs countryside and the Sayyidah Zaynab vicinity southeast of Damascus. These interests indicate a desire to stay in these two regions for a long time, and to this end the party forcibly seizes property and even finds legal grounds for remaining in specific Syrian regions. This 'legal' aspect of its real estate acquisition is not part of a comprehensive party strategy in Syria. Instead, it is a local policy used in specific areas deemed vital by the party to expand its reach and social support base.

Hezbollah benefits from exclusive facilitations provided to it by the official Syrian Real Estate Authority, municipalities and security agencies to obtain licenses to restore damaged real estate, carry out inventory procedures for inheritance and ownership transfers and obtain security approvals. These procedures are usually complicated if not indeed impossible, particularly for the Sunni populations of certain areas.⁵⁷

⁵⁰ Skype interview with the editor-in-chief of Sawt al-Asima, 13 December 2019.

⁵¹ Interview with Samir al-Saadi, *ibid*.

⁵² Interview with Sebastian al-Hamdan, *ibid*. Also see Al-Ghad, "The Northern Military Region Thwarted an Attempt to Smuggle Drugs" (in Arabic), 23 January 2020, <https://bit.ly/37AAaKA>, and Al-Ghad, "Smuggling of 2.6 Million Narcotic Pills in Consignment of Fruit Across the Jaber Borders Thwarted" (in Arabic), 8 November 2019, <https://bit.ly/37xQ0pp>.

⁵³ George Georgiopoulos, "Greece Confiscates Record Amount of Narcotic Pills Coming From Syria" (in Arabic), *Reuters*, 5 July 2019 <https://bit.ly/38CH16i>.

⁵⁴ Interview with Raed al-Salhani, *ibid*.

⁵⁵ Abdul Salam Haj Bakri, "From Bekaa to Lattakia. This is a Drug Trip to Russia" (in Arabic), *al-Modon*, 11 August 2019, <https://bit.ly/2uGM2fl>.

⁵⁶ John Fernandez, "The DEA's Targeting of Hezbollah's Global Criminal Support Network" *The Washington Institute*, 10 January 2020, <http://bit.ly/39MCSON>.

⁵⁷ Interview with Raed al-Salhani, *ibid*.

In al-Qusayr and its countryside, Hezbollah focuses on the purchase of destroyed real estate and agricultural land along the road between the town and the village of Hawsh al-Sayyid Ali, which is a major bastion of Hezbollah forces on the Syrian-Lebanese border. Its Sunni population was displaced to Lebanon after the party seized it in May 2013. Approximately 70 percent of the population of al-Qusayr and its environs have not returned. In fact, Hezbollah chooses who can return on a sectarian basis, as it has allowed Christians and Shia to return without prior security approval while preventing the return of Sunnis.⁵⁸ Although Hezbollah's secretary-general announced on 20 September 2019 that the people of al-Qusayr would be allowed to return in coordination with the Syrian and Lebanese authorities, this has not been the case on the ground.⁵⁹ Hezbollah's openness, in theory if not in practice, to the return of some residents is consistent with the Syrian regime's concept of the voluntary return of loyalists, even if they are Sunnis.⁶⁰

In addition, sales of real estate and agricultural land in the villages of Hawweek, Jusi al-Kharab and al-Munqati in the al-Qusayr countryside has been documented by Syrian mediators offering to purchase agricultural land owned by displaced persons after convincing them that returning is impossible. Al-Qusayr City Council, which is affiliated with Hezbollah, helps facilitate the procedures for legally selling and transferring property in the name of Syrian Hezbollah members.⁶¹ Since Syrian law prohibits foreign ownership of real estate, the party intervened with the regime to grant Syrian citizenship to the families of a few hundred Lebanese fighters from the border areas near al-Qusayr and to house them on the opposite side of the border.⁶²

In the Sayyidah Zaynab vicinity southeast of Damascus, the buyers are different, as Hezbollah encourages wealthy Lebanese Shia supporters to take advantage of the relatively low value of real estate. In this sense, Hezbollah's economic influence in Syria cannot be seen merely as a direct reflection of its military presence but rather it has become an expression of the interests of the Lebanese Shia bourgeoisie.⁶³ Owing to this heavy investment in real estate, the Sayyidah Zaynab area has turned into a tourist attraction for pilgrims and Shia visitors. The real estate purchase movement is also active along most of the road leading to Sayyidah Zaynab, in order to expand the area and prepare it to receive more foreign Shia pilgrims during the Ashura and Arb'een seasons. Here too, buyers have access to renovation permits and security clearances to document purchases, even if the property is under precautionary sequestration.⁶⁴

⁵⁸ Javier Gonzalez, "Land, House Occupations, and Destruction in Strategic Area: The Case of al-Qusayr in Syria," in *Reclaiming Home: The Struggle for Socially Just Housing, Land and Property Rights in Syria, Iraq and Libya*, ed. Hannes Baumann, Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, 2019, <https://bit.ly/36uR5wY>.

⁵⁹ WhatsApp interview with a Syrian researcher who is familiar with al-Qusayr who asked to remain anonymous, 16 January 2020; WhatsApp interview with journalist and activist from Homs, Samer al-Salman, 26 January 2019.

⁶⁰ Ahmad al-Shami, "Al-Qusayr: Hezbollah Allows Conditional Return of Some Families" (in Arabic), *al-Modon*, 8 July 2019, <https://bit.ly/2U2arGZ>.

⁶¹ Fares al-Rifai, "Facts and Figures: This is How Hezbollah Seized the Properties and Assets of the People of al-Qusayr" (in Arabic), *Eqtsad*, 24 January 2019, <https://bit.ly/315Z828>.

⁶² Interview with Samer al-Salman, *ibid*.

⁶³ Interview with Joseph Daher, *ibid*.

⁶⁴ Raed al-Salhani, "Why is Umm Ali Purchasing Land on the Babbila-Sayyidah Zaynab Road?" (in Arabic), *al-Modon*, 14 December 2018, <https://bit.ly/2O4nmEE>.

3. Networks of Social Relations as Means of Control

In the past few years, Hezbollah and behind it Iran have not only established militias to militarise Syrian Shia but have also spread Shiism and expanded in other sectarian circles as well. The party seeks to integrate within the local social fabric to ensure civil support in the long term by linking the widest possible segments of society with its network of interests and by creating an environment to defend itself, irrespective of any major changes on the horizon.⁶⁵

It appears difficult to distinguish between Hezbollah's activities aimed at spreading Shiism, bringing Syrian communities closer to it and to the religious principles of the Twelver Jaafari school of thought and the extensive Iranian activities in this regard aimed at subduing Syrian society and ridding it of the 'scourge of terrorism.'⁶⁶ However, Hezbollah's activity is more evident in areas with a Syrian Shia presence, especially Sayyidah Zaynab, where Shia clerics close to Hezbollah attend religious ceremonies delivering speeches focusing on the role of Hezbollah and the 'Axis of Resistance' in 'defeating terrorism.'⁶⁷ The party also has influence in a group of newly established Shia religious bodies in Syria and in a network of charities.

3.1. Shia Religious Bodies and the Spread of Shiism

Recent years have witnessed the emergence of multiple religious bodies representing the Twelver Shia community in Syria, suggesting a need of the Shia military forces for a religious umbrella to empower them and highlight their role. If the spread of these bodies is still limited and is restricted to the geographically-dispersed Syrian Shia population, it nonetheless is intended to increase the representation of the Syrian Shia community to a degree disproportionate to its numbers, albeit supposedly commensurate with the 'large sacrifices' it claims to have made to maintain the regime.

In 2012, the Islamic Jaafari Supreme Council was established in Syria. It is aligned with *wilayat al-faqih* and headed by the Damascene Sheikh Mohammad Ali al-Misky, who is at the forefront of traditional Shia ceremonies in Damascus commemorating the death of Imam Hussein and who moves between the various Syrian Shia towns. The Council, which professes allegiance to Iran's Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, is the common religious umbrella for the various Syrian Hezbollah militias.⁶⁸ That Sheikh al-Misky is commonly referred to as an 'Ayatollah' indicates he has attained the *malakat al-ijtihad* ('scholarly reasoning') distinction in the Twelver Shia doctrine, meaning he is able to adjudicate on religious rulings and has the right to issue a *fatwa*. Al-Misky also frequently visits Shia religious schools and holy sites in Iran and Iraq, where senior Shia clerics meet. He attends these occasions as the representative of 'The Shrine and Sanctuary of the Wise Woman of the Bani Hashem, Protector of the Levant, Sayyidah Zaynab, Peace be upon Her.'⁶⁹ However, none of the official Syrian publications refer to the establishment of the Council or clarify whether it is an official institution recognised by the Syrian state, even though Facebook pages and some social media outlets refer to Sheikh al-Misky as the Council's president.⁷⁰

⁶⁵ WhatsApp interview with researcher and publisher Lokman Slim, 19 January 2020.

⁶⁶ Majd al-Khatib, "Iran and The Adaptation of Syrian Society: The Tribal Council" (in Arabic), *al-Modon*, 26 February 2017, <https://bit.ly/2StIXJk>.

⁶⁷ YouTube, the Islamic Jaafari Supreme Council in Syria Channel <https://bit.ly/39vMbbF>.

⁶⁸ Mohanad Hage Ali, "The Resurrection of the Shia" (in Arabic), *Diwan*, *Carnegie Middle East Centre*, 4 May 2017, <https://bit.ly/30OexUo>.

⁶⁹ Iran Today News Agency, "President of the Islamic Jaafari Supreme Council in Syria on a Visit to Iran" (in Arabic), 29 August 2018, <https://bit.ly/2SpFfPE>.

⁷⁰ Facebook, the Islamic Jaafari Supreme Council in Syria (in Arabic), <https://bit.ly/2SzsRxO>.

The Council is made up of a religious committee comprising twelve clerics from various Syrian Shia regions. The religious committee elects a president and a general committee. Sponsored by Iran, the Council works to monopolise representation of the Syrian Twelver Shia community and to “speak in its name and specify its positions.”⁷¹ During the Syrian war, Iran succeeded in converting the majority of the Syrian Shia community into Khomeinists adopting the *wilayat al-faqih* doctrine, which entails direct loyalty to the Iranian Supreme Leader. However, the establishment of the Council gives a form of Syrian national character to the Twelver Shia situation in Syria.

The Council is not the only Shia religious body in Syria. Other groups of Shia religious leaders quickly emerged, such as ‘The Islamic Scientific Committee of the Followers of Ahl al-Bayt in Syria,’ which is headed by the country’s most important Shia cleric, Abdullah Nizam, a Damascene who gives Friday sermons in the Sayyidah Ruqayya shrine and has a direct relationship with Hezbollah Secretary-General Hassan Nasrallah. Nizam is currently a mediator between Syrian state institutions and the Shia community regarding everyday issues such as employment, redeployment, exemption from military service and security settlement.⁷² Nizam also supervises the Muhsiniyya School in the Damascus neighbourhood of al-Amarah and chairs the Sayyidah Ruqayya branch of the Bilad al-Sham University for Sharia Studies. The Committee aims to unify religious discourse in harmony with “Islamic and national unity” and “care for the affairs of Ahl al-Bayt scholars.”⁷³

In addition to Nizam, the Shia cleric Fadi Burhan from al-Zabadani is also considered close to Hezbollah. He describes himself as an “ambassador of peace between the sects,” although he played a role in implementing the Four Towns Agreement, the first official demographic engineering process in Syria. Sheikh Burhan assumes the position of Director of External Relations in the Khomeini Religious Hawza in Sayyidah Zaynab and supervises the documentation of the lineage of Ahl al-Bayt. He describes himself as *naqib al-ashraf* (‘head of the Prophet Muhammad’s descendants’)⁷⁴ in Syria. He also has a close relationship with a number of the most important figures in the Syrian regime. It is reported that his rapid rise, which was due to his excellent relationship with Hezbollah, angered higher-ranked Shia clerics in Sayyidah Zaynab.⁷⁵

In addition, Iran is spreading Shiism, particularly within Sunni tribal circles, through calls for affiliation with Ahl al-Bayt. Hence the importance of the ‘Ahl al-Bayt centres and councils’ based in Sayyidah Zaynab and the determination of the genealogy and number of Ahl al-Bayt descendants. Organisations involved in this field include the World Assembly of Ahl al-Bayt, the Sons of Imam Ali Centre and the Assembly of Shia References, in addition to the Naqabat al-Ashraf in Syria led by Fadi Burhan.⁷⁶ Through its activities in tribal areas, by establishing an Arab tribal council in 2015 and holding frequent tribal gatherings, Hezbollah seeks to create a mixed-doctrine tribal framework to reduce the severity of the popular rejection of its presence in Syria.⁷⁷

3.2. Integration in Local Communities

After years of ferocious war in Syria accompanied by intense sectarian incitement, Hezbollah is now working to unwind resentment between Syrian Sunnis and Shiites and bring them closer in various ways. In these endeavours, the party is capitalising on existing Shia communities and

⁷¹ Mohanad Hage Ali, “The Islamic Jaafari Council in Syria” (in Arabic), *al-Modon*, 24 April 2017, <https://bit.ly/2TVj722>.

⁷² Interview with Raed al-Salhani, *ibid*.

⁷³ “Dialogue with His Eminence, Mr. Abdullah Nizam, Head of the Scholars Committee in Syria” (in Arabic), *Iuvmpress* website, 18 January 2017, <https://bit.ly/2tb9fWS>.

⁷⁴ *Al-ashraf* are those who claim to descend from the Prophet Mohammad through his daughter Fatima.

⁷⁵ WhatsApp interview with journalist Diaa Mohamed, 7 January 2020.

⁷⁶ Ali Muhammad Taha, “Iranian Centres in Syria to Facilitate Affiliation with Ahl al-Bayt” (in Arabic), *al-Rasid*, 17 September 2017, <https://bit.ly/36GYyJr>.

⁷⁷ Interview with a Syrian researcher based in Canada who asked to remain anonymous, 27 December 2019.

expanding through them into a broader social environment. It distributes food and financial aid to the poor and provides protection for anti-regime groups in ‘reconciled’ areas. For example, it has been able to recruit approximately 3,000 people from Daraa into its ranks, reflecting its ability to reach their families through certain charities⁷⁸ in order to bring them closer to the Twelver Shia doctrine.⁷⁹

Indeed, Hezbollah targets diverse segments of the population, often focusing on minorities. For example, it appeals to Bedouin clans in the villages of Kamouneh and Alqin and through the mayor of Bir al-Sabil in the Triangle of Death on the old Damascus-Daraa road. It also seeks to expand among Palestinians in the town of al-Mazareeb in the Daraa countryside and to families of the al-Waysiyyah tribe originally from the Syrian Golan, now residing in Sayyidah Zaynab.

Moreover, in cooperation with the IRGC Hezbollah has succeeded in integrating within local communities in Aleppo through the Aleppo Defenders Corps, which provides relief services to families such as supplies of bread and fuel and contributes to the renovation of schools. Naturally, the Corps pays special attention to Aleppo’s Shia in Nubl and al-Zahraa, the Shia displaced from al-Fouaa and Kefraya and the families of Afghan, Pakistani and Iraqi fighters in Aleppo, for whom the party has arranged housing in the homes of those displaced from eastern Aleppo. The Corps also participates in Armenian, Syriac, Sunni and Christian celebrations in Aleppo, in addition to Sufi *mawalid* celebrations.

The Aleppo Defenders Corps was formed in February 2017 as an umbrella group for local militias affiliated with the National Defence Forces, although it also plays a role in civilian life. Currently, it not only controls entire militias, including the al-Baqir Brigade affiliated with Syrian Hezbollah, but also has control over *mukhtar* and district councils and has representation in governorate and city councils. Each of the Corps’ zones has branch offices dealing with education, culture, services and religious affairs.⁸⁰ Although their commander, Hajj Mohsen, is known only by name, he is considered the *de facto* ruler of Aleppo.

Most of the sector and zone commanders in the Corps belong to Lebanese Hezbollah and are clearly influenced by its experience as an integrated project. Therefore, they work to make the Corps’ work integrated, providing various preaching and welfare services, including caring for the families of those killed during the war, organising proselytism and other religious activities and participating in religious and official ceremonies. The Corps also includes hundreds of workers, volunteers and employees both male and female and has heavy machinery, including bulldozers, fire engines and ambulances, in addition to children’s clubs and health clinics.⁸¹

⁷⁸ Such as the Supporters of The Immortal Leader, al-Zahraa Society, Imdad Association, Al-Bustan and Ayadi al-Khayr.

⁷⁹ Interview with Samir al-Saadi, *ibid*.

⁸⁰ Khaled al-Khatib, “Aleppo Defenders Corps: Four Zones of Iranian Influence” (in Arabic), *al-Modon*, 30 June 2019, <https://bit.ly/38O0ssT>.

⁸¹ Interview with Khaled al-Khatib, *ibid*.

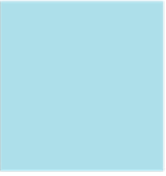
Conclusion

The nature of Hezbollah's deployment in different Syrian regions varies according to its perception of the strategic importance of each region. Hezbollah has maintained a widespread presence in the small Syrian Shia community and has encouraged Syrian Shia militias to join the regime's forces, which has given it additional influence over the Syrian military establishment. The party also focuses on the Syrian-Lebanese border zone in order to secure land routes, weapons depots and training camps, and also on the south of Syria in preparation for any possible confrontation with Israel.

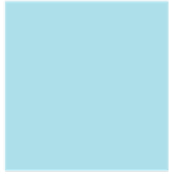
As Hezbollah's engagement in the Syrian war evolved, it explored the potential for maintaining sources of self-financing in the light of the sanctions imposed on it and on Iran. It began to monopolise the smuggling market and to control the drug trade, thereby financing a portion of its Syrian operations, and it strengthened its presence in the border region between Lebanon and Syria. Part of the revenue has been invested in financing land purchases and promoting demographic change to build and expand its popular base, especially in al-Qusayr south of Homs and Sayyidah Zaynab southeast of Damascus.

Given the integrated dimensions of Hezbollah's presence in Syria, it appears determined to remain in the country over the long term. It pursues this goal not only by establishing permanent military bases but also by connecting people to its economic network of interests and creating various umbrellas and formations, both military and civilian, to empower Syrian Shia and draw closer to the rest of the Syrian population in sectarian and ethno-tribal terms.

Hezbollah's experience in Syria has not been an unequivocal success story. The party has suffered many setbacks at the tactical and strategic levels and has undergone a continual process of reassessment. Hezbollah has managed to achieve the aims of its intervention, but it has also suffered great losses among its fighters and exposed its locations in Syria to repeated Israeli targeting, not to mention the political cost incurred in terms of its general image in the Arab and Islamic worlds as it turned from 'resistance' against Israel into an armed party in a sectarian struggle between Sunnis and Shia. Likewise, its military intervention in Syria has not sufficed to turn it into an influential political player. It has found itself excluded from the negotiation table regarding Syria's future, with Iran remaining the chief negotiator in the name of the 'axis' for which Hezbollah fights.



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