



PERSPECTIVES

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Hezbollah's Firm Grip on Lebanon Fuels Region's Sectarian Strife

by Yaakov Lappin

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: Saudi Arabia is alarmed at the rapid expansion of Iran and its proxies. That alarm reached a new peak when the Kingdom accused Hezbollah of launching a ballistic missile from Yemen towards its international airport in Riyadh.

Chief Iranian proxy Hezbollah has a firm grip on Lebanon, and its bloody intervention in Syria was instrumental in preserving the brutal Assad regime. Yet Hezbollah's meddling in other regions of the Middle East does not receive much attention.

That changed drastically earlier this month. Saudi Arabia, which is leading a coalition of Sunni states in a war against the Iranian-supported Shiite Houthi radical organization, Ansar Allah, which has taken over parts of Yemen, [publicly accused](#) Hezbollah of firing a ballistic missile at its capital, Riyadh, from Yemen. "It was an Iranian missile, launched by Hezbollah from territory occupied by the Houthis in Yemen," [charged Saudi Foreign Minister Adel Jubeir](#). A Saudi air defense battery shot the missile down before it struck Riyadh's airport, but the incident has seen Saudi- Iranian tensions, which were already high, spike.

A US Air Force source [reportedly confirmed the Saudi information](#) about the Iranian origins of the missile.

Iran denied the Saudi accusation and played down its links with the Houthis. But this denial flies in the face of mounting evidence of an important Hezbollah and Iranian role in assisting Ansar Allah in Yemen.

Some of this evidence comes from Hezbollah itself, or more precisely, its unofficial mouthpiece in Lebanon, the *Al-Akhbar* newspaper. Editor Ibrahim

Al-Amin [published a boastful article in July 2017](#) detailing Hezbollah's spread across the region. "In Yemen, Hezbollah has become a direct partner in strengthening the military capabilities of the Houthi Ansar Allah, who consider Hezbollah to be their truthful ally," Al-Amin wrote.

The same article proudly stated that in Iraq, Hezbollah's "experts are present in the biggest operations rooms ... [Hassan] Nasrallah serves as the commander of the Popular Mobilization Units [the Iranian-backed Shiite militias] in Iraq."

Hezbollah's activities around the Middle East have become controversial in Lebanon, where a portion of the population opposes its monopoly on political and military power, its militant ideology, and Iran's proxy control over the country.

Last year, Future TV, a station owned by recently retired Lebanese Prime Minister Saad Hariri (who quit in protest of Iran's takeover of Lebanon), [broadcast what it said was a video](#) of a Hezbollah operative providing military-terrorist training to Houthi fighters. "So I have (for example) the assassination, God willing, of the head of the Saudi Border Guard," the Hezbollah operative says in the video. "We take a group, a special unit, it goes in, assassinates, kills and plants a large bomb. This is what we call a special operation. I have a special operation in Riyadh."

At this stage in the video, the Hezbollah member briefing the Houthis is interrupted with a question: "[Is this] a suicide operation?"

He replies: "Possibly a martyrdom operation. We do not call it suicide. We call it a special operation."

An examination of the flag used by Ansar Allah finds that its red and green colors are influenced by the Iranian flag, and more importantly, the motto etched on the flag – "Death to America, Death to Israel, A Curse Upon the Jews, Victory to Islam" – is inspired by official Iranian mottos.

According to Ely Karmon, a senior research scholar at the International Institute for Counter-Terrorism in Israel, the Houthis have been influenced by Hezbollah in more than one way. "The group's use of militant *anashid* (jihadist anthems) in its videos further portrays it as more in line with Hezbollah's models of 'resistance,'" he told the IPT. "Images depicting Houthi fighters with the sun as a background further draw a parallel to other Shiite jihadist groups, giving the Houthis spiritual legitimacy within the context of a Shiite jihadist organization."

Abdul-Malik al-Houthi, the current Houthi leader, delivers speeches in a style inspired by Hezbollah's Nasrallah, Karmon said.

Houthi leaders also appointed a prominent Iranian-educated religious figure with close links to the Islamic Republic as the top Islamic authority in Yemen's capital, Sana'a.

A May 2015 *Financial Times* [report](#), "Lebanon's Hezbollah and Yemen's Houthis open up on links," cited Hezbollah members as saying they have "played a more active role on the ground in Yemen. A Houthi official in Beirut said relations with the Lebanese movement span over a decade, while a Hezbollah commander said Houthis and Hezbollah trained together for the past 10 years in Iran, then in Lebanon and in Yemen." The report added that Hezbollah helped create the Houthi Al-Masira television channel, which is based in Beirut's southern suburbs, a district under Hezbollah control.

Earlier this year, [Karmon assessed that](#) "[a] physical Iranian presence based on a strategic cooperation with the Houthis, both ground and naval," in Yemeni ports on the Red Sea, as well as control over other strategic waterways, "represent[s] a direct threat to Israel's security and interests." The Houthi takeover of Yemen's capital and other regions increased Shiite Iran's influence there, the Meir Amit Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center [reported](#).

Based on publicly available information, it seems safe to conclude that the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps is using Hezbollah to strengthen the Houthis militarily in Yemen. In the process, it is helping Iran increase its influence over this poor, war-torn state, which is also experiencing a humanitarian disaster on a grand scale due to the ongoing conflict.

Hezbollah's role as a regional proliferator of terrorism, radicalism, and high-level operational capabilities is a constant threat to the Middle East and beyond.

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