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Iran Behind the Scenes During the Second Israel-Lebanon War

Raphael Ofek and Pesach Malovany



Mideast Security and Policy Studies No. 182

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Cover image: Smoke rises above Haifa, Israel after Katyusha rocket fired from Lebanon strikes Rothschild Hospital, August 2006, photo by Tomer Gabel via Flickr CC

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Iran Behind the Scenes During the Second Israel-Lebanon War

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This paper presents a new perspective on the reasons for the outbreak of the Second Lebanon War against Hezbollah in 2006.

Incidents of warming on Israel's border with Lebanon vis-à-vis Hezbollah occasionally raise the question of whether Iran is also in the picture. This is a highly relevant question, as Tehran appears to have done its utmost behind the scenes to operate Hezbollah against Israel with the aim of diverting the attention of Western states away from the containment of Iran's military nuclear program.

While Iran claims that its nuclear program is for "peaceful use" only, it has avoided declaring the initiation of nuclear projects to the IAEA (International Atomic Energy Agency). In so doing, it violated its commitment to the IAEA and acted contrary to the NPT (Non-Proliferation Treaty). Iran's crisis with the IAEA and Western countries reached a peak in 2005, when it began to fear the possibility of US military action against it.

The thesis of this study, which states that Iran's behind-the-scenes activities in the Second Lebanon War were intended to deter an attack on its nuclear program, relies heavily on statements made openly in the media by senior members of the Iranian leadership and Hezbollah.

As for what is happening today regarding the Iranian nuclear program and Hezbollah's activities, there is a strong similarity between the current situation and the situation of the hostile quadrangle in 2006: Iran and Hezbollah against the US and Israel.

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INTRODUCTION

After the Khomeini revolution in 1979, the main goal of the regime in Tehran—in addition to securing its survival—was to make Iran a regional power under the Islamic Shiite banner. With that goal in mind, Iran has pursued a nuclear weapons program while at the same time establishing and operating Shiite proxy militias across the Middle East, with an emphasis on Hezbollah in Lebanon.

Hezbollah was founded in 1982 after Israel's Operation "Peace for Galilee." From the day it was established, Hezbollah has seen the State of Israel as an enemy that must be expelled from Lebanon and, if possible, destroyed. On the eve of the Second Lebanon War in 2006, Hezbollah reached the peak of its power as a regular military organization, and it continues to rule southern Lebanon to this day.

This study will lay out ample evidence that Iran was behind the establishment of Hezbollah and has supported it throughout its existence. It funded the organization, equipped it with weapons, and trained its people. Significantly, Hezbollah's terrorist acts were coordinated and conducted in full cooperation with the regime in Tehran.

The Second Lebanon War broke out after two Israeli IDF soldiers, Ehud Goldwasser and Eldad Regev, were kidnapped and killed by Hezbollah terrorists on the Lebanese border on July 12, 2006. This was not the first such incident conducted by Hezbollah. On October 7, 2000—i.e., several months after the IDF had left Lebanon—Hezbollah abducted and killed three soldiers on Mount Dov: Beny Avraham, Adi Avitan, and Omar Souad. The organization returned their bodies to Israel in an exchange deal four years later, but continued to attempt to kidnap Israeli soldiers on other occasions both in the interim before the exchange and after it was completed.

Some claimed at the time, without evidence, that the abductions and murders in July 2006 were pre-arranged by Iran and Hezbollah.¹ They alleged that Iran was seeking to divert world attention from UN Security Council Resolution 1696, which was due to be adopted the same month, on July 31. This resolution approved the IAEA demand that Tehran completely suspend nuclear activities that can be used to produce fissile materials for nuclear weapons. These activities included uranium enrichment and plutonium production through the reprocessing of nuclear fuel irradiated in a reactor.

The Iranian nuclear program had run into many difficulties at the beginning of the 21st century, especially in 2002-2003. During that period, Iran's violations of the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) began to be exposed, and those violations clearly indicated that Tehran was pursuing a nuclear weapons program. At the heart of the plan were projects to build infrastructure for uranium enrichment and to build a heavy water reactor for plutonium production.

That was not the only pressure on Tehran in the early years of the century. Following the events of September 11, 2001, the United States took control of Afghanistan, placing American forces on Iran's eastern border. Then, in March 2003, Iraq was defeated and occupied by the US-led military coalition, which overthrew the brutal Baathist regime led by Saddam Hussein. US forces were thus deployed on Iran's borders with both Iraq and Afghanistan. And in December 2003, in an attempt to ward off a similar fate to that of Saddam Hussein, Libyan ruler Muammar Qaddafi, who had been pursuing nuclear, biological, and chemical weapons, announced that he was dismantling all such projects in his country.

At the time, Iran had to assess the extent to which it was going to continue to use Lebanon and Hezbollah for its own purposes. That question remains relevant today, as tensions with Israel are rising. This is due to both IDF strikes in Syria, which have killed Iranian military personnel as well as Hezbollah militants from time to time, and the series of mysterious explosions that took place in June and July 2020 throughout Iran.

THE IRANIAN NUCLEAR EFFORT AS OF 2006

The covert components of the Iranian nuclear program—the construction of the Natanz uranium enrichment facility and the plan to build the heavy water reactor near the city of Arak—were first exposed on August 14, 2002 at a press conference in Washington conducted by Alireza Jafarzadeh, Spokesman for the National Council of Resistance of Iran (NCRI), an exiled Iranian opposition group.² Despite Iran's status as a signatory to both the NPT and the Safeguards Agreement with the IAEA, it had refrained from declaring the nuclear projects at Natanz and Arak to the IAEA.

At the IAEA's annual conference in September 2002, then IAEA Director-General Muhammad Baradei, an Egyptian diplomat, asked the president of the Iranian Atomic Energy Organization (AEOI), Gholam Reza Aghazadeh, about the exposed information. In his response, Aghazadeh sought to portray the uncovered nuclear projects as intended for "peaceful uses" like electricity generation. Aghazadeh invited Baradei to visit Iran, which he did on February 21, 2003.

After Baradei's visit, Tehran authorities agreed to allow IAEA inspectors to review Iran's implementation of the nuclear safeguards agreement. However, Baradei downplayed the military aspects of the Iranian nuclear effort, preferring instead to operate through official diplomatic channels.

The first quarterly report from the IAEA on this issue,³ published in June 2003, addressed serious findings by its inspectors regarding Iran's violations of the nuclear safeguards agreement. The inspectors had been surprised to discover, for example, that at the Tehran Nuclear Research Center, the Jabr Ibn Hayan laboratory had conducted chemical experiments to produce uranium compounds that Iran had not declared. These compounds included metallic uranium, from which a uranium nuclear weapon core is produced. Iran had also concealed from the IAEA the activities of the Kalaye Electric workshop in Tehran, which produced centrifuge components for uranium enrichment. Despite all this, the IAEA report used soft language to describe the inspectors' findings, referring to Tehran's acts of concealment as "failures."

However, the IAEA's reports from November 2003 to November 2004 were much more critical of Iran's conduct on the nuclear issue.⁴ This probably reflects the influence of Olli Heinonen of Finland, who served in those years as the IAEA's deputy director-general and head of the agency's safeguards department. Heinonen was very hawkish toward Iran compared to Baradei.

- The IAEA Board of Governors convened on September 12, 2003 and demanded, among other things, that Iran: improve its cooperation with the IAEA and provide maximum transparency to agency inspectors;
- avoid future failures to report nuclear sites and materials;
- temporarily suspend all activities in the field of uranium enrichment, as well as in the field of reprocessing irradiated nuclear fuel (activities related to plutonium production), as such activities that could enable Iran to produce fissile materials for nuclear weapons.

The IAEA required that satisfactory measures be put in place to ensure that Iran was complying with its commitment to refrain from activities that could aid in the development of nuclear weapons.

The Agency's criticism stemmed from newly revealed facts that indicated that Iran had been insufficiently transparent. Examples include:

- Iran told the IAEA that its centrifuge project was the result of indigenous design that was based on open source information published in the professional literature. It further claimed that at the Kalaye Electric workshop, only centrifuge components were produced and no experiments were performed with nuclear material (e.g., UF₆ or uranium hexafluoride, which, when in a gas state, allows uranium to be enriched). It admitted, however, in a letter to the IAEA in October 2003, that a number of uranium enrichment experiments had been performed with centrifuges at the facility by using a small amount of UF₆. It later emerged that about 2 kg of UF₆ was actually used.

- Moreover, samples taken by IAEA inspectors from the centrifuges operated in the facility contained uranium particles, both those formed during a low-grade enrichment process and those formed during a 36% high-enrichment process. This discovery raised the question of Iran's possible unreported amount of uranium. Inquiries into this question led the Iranian authorities to admit that the source of the highly enriched uranium particles was in centrifuge components purchased from a foreign country. Thus was it determined that IR1, the first model of Iranian centrifuges, was nothing other than a replica of the P1 Pakistani centrifuge. As a result, the secret nuclear deal was revealed between the Iranian Atomic Energy Organization and Pakistani scientist Dr. Abdul Qadeer Khan, who is considered the "father of the Pakistani nuclear bomb." As part of its engagement with Khan, more advanced P2 centrifuges were sold to Iran—a deal the Iranians initially denied had ever taken place. In addition to this information, the IAEA learned later that Khan had sold nuclear bomb drawings to Iran.
- In addition to the centrifuge's uranium enrichment project, an Iranian uranium enrichment facility using the laser method that operated at the Lashkar-Ab'ad site was also unveiled. After the revelation of the facility's existence, Iranian scientists claimed that the studies performed there involved laser fusion processes and laser spectroscopy. Their attempt to deceive the IAEA failed when the inspectors discovered copper vapor lasers (CVLs), which are designed to enrich uranium. (Iran's efforts in this area were unsuccessful, as they were in other countries, and the project came to an end.)
- The Iranians informed the IAEA of their plan to build a heavy water reactor near the city of Arak, the IR-40, with a planned capacity of 40 megawatts. Here too, they said the reactor was based on an indigenous design. As presented to the IAEA, the facility was designed to operate as a research reactor as well as to produce radioisotopes for industrial and medical applications. It was supposedly meant to serve as a replacement for the old research reactor operated at the Tehran Nuclear Research Center that had been supplied to Iran by the US in 1967 and was upgraded in the

late 1980s by the Argentine company INVAP.⁵ In so stating, they sought to refute the claim that the reactor was designed to produce plutonium for nuclear weapons. The reactor drawings provided by the Iranian authorities to IAEA inspectors in July 2003 did not show the existence of the “hot cells” (cells for handling nuclear radiation emitting materials) that would be used to produce radioisotopes, but the IAEA had received information about an Iranian effort to acquire overseas manipulators and lead-glass windows, which are intended for “hot cells.” It later turned out that this was an attempt to purchase these items from a French company.

Based on these data, the IAEA was convinced that the IR-40 heavy water reactor was indeed intended for the production of plutonium, and that the manipulators and lead-glass windows were intended to build a “hot lab” for separating the plutonium generated from the spent nuclear fuel of the IR-40 reactor. The Iranians’ initial response was that at this stage the final design of the IR-40 reactor and the “hot cells” intended for it had not yet been determined. However, in November 2003, they confirmed to the IAEA that they intended to construct a dedicated building for “hot cells” near the reactor.

In this regard, it should be noted that the IAEA inspectors discovered that at Tehran’s research reactor, natural uranium was irradiated in order to produce plutonium in it, and experiments were performed to extract plutonium from the irradiated uranium. Moreover, it later became clear that contrary to the Iranians’ claim, the design of the IR-40 reactor was carried out in Russia by the Nikiet Nuclear Research Institute from Moscow together with a company from Obninsk.⁶

- Another finding of the IAEA inspectors was that experiments had been carried out at the research reactor of Tehran’s nuclear center between 1989 and 1993 to produce polonium-210 by irradiating bismuth metal targets in neutrons. Polonium-210 is used in one of the methods by which neutrons are produced to act as a trigger for a nuclear bomb. The Iranians claimed that the polonium-210 they tried to produce was in fact designed to develop thermoelectric batteries, a very rare application of this isotope.

- In June 2004, the IAEA asked Iran to grant its inspectors access to the Lavisan-Shian site in Tehran after the Agency had been informed that nuclear activity had taken place at the site, including the presence of whole-body detectors to measure radioactive radiation in the human body. The IAEA requested this due to fears that Iran was acting to conceal activities previously carried out at the site. The reason for the concern was that as of November 2003, Iran began demolishing all the structures at the site.

Iran replied that it had been forced to “raze” the site’s soil, as the area was the subject of a legal dispute between the Ministry of Defense and the Tehran municipality that had been decided in favor of the municipality. According to the Iranian authorities, the organization that operated the site until 1998 was the “Physics Research Center” (PHRC), subordinate to the Ministry of Defense, whose main function was “readiness to prevent casualties due to nuclear attacks or accidents.” The site was later transferred to the “Center for Biological Research.”

The IAEA inspectors took samples from the site, but without positive results. It should be noted, however, that it is now well known that in parallel with activities within the Iranian Atomic Energy Organization, which the Iranian regime sought to present as legitimate and for “peaceful use,” the Iranian Ministry of Defense conducted extensive activities at the PHRC Center. These activities were exposed in an abundance of telexes sent between the PHRC in Tehran and various Western companies.⁷

In light of Iran’s rebellious conduct regarding the nuclear issue, in the second half of 2003 talks began between representatives of the French, British, and German governments (the EU3 countries) and representatives of Iran and in cooperation with the IAEA to put pressure on Iran and prevent it from advancing its nuclear weapons program⁸. The US was in the picture (albeit behind the scenes), but European countries were careful not to involve the US in direct talks with Iran for fear that it would take a too tough stance. Indeed, at the G-8 summit held in June 2003 in Evian, France, the US and its allies expressed concern about Iran’s secret nuclear weapons program. The US said, “We will not ignore the implications of Iran’s advanced nuclear program” and

“We offer our strongest support for a comprehensive IAEA review of this country’s nuclear program.”⁹

At the time, the Tehran regime was quite anxious about the possibility of American military action against it. This was because of the fairly recent memory of the US operation in Afghanistan (2001) followed by the Gulf War and the occupation of Iraq by a US-led military coalition in early 2003. In late 2003, Iran announced, in coordination with the IAEA, that it had decided to “voluntarily” suspend various activities in the field of uranium enrichment.¹⁰

Subsequently, on November 15, 2004, it declared its readiness to completely suspend the uranium enrichment program. This was in exchange for a promise that the issue would not be referred to the UN Security Council for the purpose of imposing sanctions on Iran, as well as to improve its ties with the West. However, it should be noted that earlier, in late 2003, Iran made it clear that any suspension of its program would be short-lived and only for the purpose of building trust between Tehran and the international community.¹¹

According to IAEA reports from late 2004 and 2005, Iran did not fully cooperate with the Agency, and despite its commitment to the NPT, had failed to report all of its activities in the fields of uranium enrichment and plutonium separation. It had not even declared several sites that were involved in nuclear research and development.¹² But Tehran, which until that point believed it had reached a temporary settlement with the West and the IAEA, reacted sharply to the IAEA’s criticism. On January 6, 2006, Iran notified the IAEA of its decision to resume all uranium enrichment-related activities, which it claimed it had “voluntarily” agreed to suspend at the end of 2003. Sure enough, it resumed those activities as early as February 2006.¹³

Iran has repeatedly and consistently claimed that:

- Its nuclear program is for self-sufficiency.
- Its enrichment program has been kept clandestine for more than 20 years because, under its Safeguards Agreement with the IAEA, it was not obliged to declare its nuclear facilities until 180 days before nuclear materials were introduced. The Natanz enrichment

facility was allegedly built secretly and buried deep underground for fear of air attacks from Israel or others.

- Its numerous violations of the Safeguards Agreement were minor and should be regarded as only technical reporting failures.
- It refused to fully cooperate with the IAEA and to resolve the unanswered questions about its nuclear program arose because the agency's inquiries intruded on Iran's legal rights, commercial secrets, and military security arrangements.

It appears that during that period, the regime in Tehran was very concerned that its plan to produce a nuclear arsenal might go down the drain.¹⁴ The uncovered "nuclear archive" documented the goal of the Iranian nuclear weapons program: the construction of five nuclear bombs, each with a capacity of 10 kilotons (the size of the Hiroshima bomb in WWII), which could be installed in the Shahav-3 ballistic missile. According to the documents, the Iranian nuclear program was split into two arms in 2003: one that was visible to the public, intended for purely civilian applications, to be conducted within the Iranian Atomic Energy Organization; and the other a secret nuclear weapons development program under the AMAD project, headed by Muhsen Fakhrizadeh.

The problem for the regime was that the only way to implement the plan to produce five nuclear bombs was to obtain about 100 kg of uranium enriched to over 90% grade, and uranium enrichment could only be carried out in the Iranian Atomic Energy Organization's overt system. It must therefore be assumed that in Iran's view, this was another reason to resume its uranium enrichment activities.

In view of this situation, Western leaders feared that the US would attack and destroy the Iranian nuclear sites.¹⁵ This fear was due to the following reasons:

- In President Bush's State of the Union speech on January 29, 2002,¹⁶ he said: "The United States of America will not permit the world's most dangerous regimes to threaten us with the world's most destructive weapons." He also named Iran as part of the "axis of evil."

- The precedent of the war in Iraq in 2003.
- In late 2004, US intelligence seized a stolen Iranian laptop that contained more than 1,000 pages of computer simulations and reports of experiments carried out by Iranian nuclear scientists. This was conclusive evidence of Iran's activity in developing a compact nuclear warhead that would fit its Shahab-3 ballistic missile. The information on the laptop was transferred by the Americans to the intelligence services of Britain, Germany, and France so they could examine its contents. It was also transferred to the IAEA in November 2005 with the aim of increasing pressure on Iran.¹⁷
- Statements by senior US administration officials who had warned in 2006 about the danger of the Iranian threat. Also, in the wake of the 2008 presidential election, Democratic Party leaders including Hillary Clinton criticized President Bush for not taking any significant steps against Iran.^{15,18}
- According to one report, Washington expanded its covert operations within Iran in early 2006. It even promoted the planning of a possible air strike, which could have included the use of tactical nuclear weapons against Iran's nuclear facilities.¹

WHAT CAUSED THE SECOND LEBANON WAR?

Hezbollah's initiative to attack an IDF patrol on the Lebanese border and kidnap two of its soldiers, which led to a harsh Israeli response that expanded into a new war in Lebanon, raises a number of important questions:

- What prompted Hezbollah to make this move? Was the goal only to obtain bargaining chips for the release of prisoners held by Israel?
- Was the timing of the attack, July 12, 2006, coincidental or significant in the context of what was happening on the Iranian nuclear issue? This is in view of Security Council Resolution 1696 against Iran, which was passed on July 31, 2006, during the war. The decision endorsed the IAEA's demand that Tehran completely suspend all nuclear activities that could be used to produce fissile materials for nuclear weapons, including uranium enrichment and plutonium production.

- Was Iran involved, and if so to what extent, in the abduction of the Israeli soldiers, its planning, and the decision to carry it out?

Some were of the opinion that the decision to attack the IDF patrol in Lebanon belonged solely to Hezbollah, with no external involvement from Iran or any other element, and there was no connection to the Iranian nuclear issue.¹⁹ According to those who held this view, the move was intended solely to bring about the release of Lebanese prisoners in Israeli prisons. Hezbollah's secretary general, Hassan Nasrallah, had said several times that he intended to release Samir Kuntar and other terrorists from Israeli prisons by capturing Israeli soldiers and using them as bargaining chips. The operation itself was even nicknamed "Sincere Promise".

On the other hand, others believed that Tehran had pressured Hezbollah to carry out the attack. According to them, the attack was carried out with full coordination between Iran and Hezbollah, and was intended to reduce intensifying international pressure on Tehran on the nuclear issue by shifting the point of focus elsewhere in the region.

This assessment was supported by Claude Moniquet, a former French journalist and foreign intelligence official who, among other things, established and chaired the European Strategic Center for Intelligence and Security in Brussels, who claimed that according to his findings and information, Iran was behind the planning of the entire move.²⁰

He also mentioned a meeting held on July 5, 2006 in Damascus between Ali Larijani, security adviser to Iranian president Ahmadinejad, and Nasrallah, the leader of Hezbollah, in which they decided together to carry out the abduction. The object was to initiate a war in the region that would erupt at the same time that the issue of Iran's nuclear project was coming before the Security Council. Moniquet said the decision to create a war in the region by Hezbollah was not taken in Beirut but in Tehran, given Iran's intention to divert international threats and pressure on it due to the nuclear program.²¹

The meeting between Larijani and Nasrallah in Damascus shortly before the abduction of the two Israeli soldiers was mentioned in an

article by American journalist Barbara Slavin, who wrote that the July 12, 2006 kidnapping was related to the Bush administration's decision on that day to give Iran a deadline by which to announce its agreement to negotiate its nuclear programs.²²

This Iranian move, if indeed it occurred for the reason given above, is reminiscent of a similar event that led to the first Lebanon war in June 1982. At that time, Iraqi ruler Saddam Hussein planned to assassinate Israeli ambassador to London Shlomo Argov. He meant this to ignite a new war in the region that would result in ending Baghdad's war with Iran, which had become a heavy burden for Iraq. But the plan did not bring Saddam the desired result, and the Iraq-Iran war continued for six more bloody years.

TESTIMONY OF HEZBOLLAH LEADERSHIP ON IRAN'S CONTROL OVER THE ORGANIZATION

There is ample evidence of Iran's control over Hezbollah and its leadership. This can be found in statements by the organization's leaders, with an emphasis on events that took place in the region in which both Hezbollah and Iran were involved:

- Subhi al-Tufaili, a Shiite cleric who served as Hezbollah's secretary general from the organization's inception until his replacement in 1991 by Abbas Moussawi, stated as early as 2003 that "the Iranian leadership was, and still is, responsible for all Hezbollah's decisions."²³
- Hezbollah acted on Iran's orders to assassinate former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafic Hariri on February 14, 2005.²⁴
- Nasrallah's deputy, Sheikh Naim Qassem, stated in an interview with the Iranian television channel Al-Kawthar on April 16, 2007, and repeated in an interview with the Lebanese newspaper *Nahar Al-Shabab* on July 30, that "Hezbollah receives instructions regarding the manner of fighting against Israel from Wali al-Faqih [the guardian of the jurisprudent]," which is the nickname of Iranian leader Ali Khamenei.²⁵

- Nasrallah referred in 2011 to the possibility of an attack on Iran's nuclear facilities by the US or Israel. He said that as a result, a comprehensive war would break out in the region, hinting at the possibility that his organization would join Iran's expected response.²⁶
- In early 2013, Hezbollah, directed by Tehran, became involved in the Syrian civil war. It fought alongside the failed Syrian army of president Bashar Assad, and gave it its first significant victory over rebel forces at the Battle of Qusayr. The rationale for the deployment of Hezbollah forces was the need to fight ISIS to prevent its intrusion into Lebanon. There is a high probability that this incident, as well as other incidents related to Hezbollah, were conducted with the direct involvement of Qassem Soleimani, who was responsible for Iranian activities throughout the region.²⁷
- Nasrallah stated in a speech in Beirut on November 11, 2013, which he delivered on "Shahid Day" (the anniversary of a terrorist attack carried out by a Shiite suicide bomber on the Israeli military government building in Tyre on November 11, 1982), that "the organization [Hezbollah]... has pledged to operate under the leadership of Imam Khomeini and the 'leader' Khamenei in everything related to the fight against the Zionist enemy."²⁸
- In an interview with the U-News network and the Lebanese channel Al-Manar on February 13, 2020 in memory of Qassem Soleimani, Nasrallah gave an example of Hezbollah's compliance with Soleimani's demands on behalf of the regime in Tehran. He referred to an incident that took place in 2014 with the establishment of the "People's Recruitment" force in Iraq, which was intended to fight ISIS with the involvement of Iran and Qassem Soleimani as commander of the Quds Force. According to Nasrallah, Soleimani arrived in Beirut at midnight to meet with him and demanded that he immediately allocate 120 field commanders from Hezbollah who would join the war against ISIS in Iraq.²⁹

THE IRANIAN, SYRIAN, AND HEZBOLLAH VERSIONS OF THE OUTBREAK OF THE SECOND LEBANON WAR

On October 2, 2019, the U-News network conducted a number of interviews with senior officials who were involved in the Second Lebanon War in 2006, including commander of the Revolutionary Guards Quds Force Soleimani and Hezbollah Secretary General Nasrallah.³⁰

During his interview, Soleimani revealed his participation in the Second Lebanon War, noting that he was present in Lebanon for 33 days, until the war's end on August 14, 2006. He said he had been involved in the conduct of the war by Hezbollah throughout and was even present in the organization's operating room in Dahieh, at the southern entrance of Beirut, alongside Imad Mughniyeh.

In Soleimani's view, the Second Lebanon War was a result of the failed US attempts, conducted in cooperation with Israel and backed by Saudi Arabia and Egypt, to wipe out the Iranian revolution. Since Khomeini's revolution in 1979, the Iranian regime faced efforts by Washington to control the region and to be involved in all its conflicts, including the Iran-Iraq War (1981-88), the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982, and Israel's "Grapes of Wrath" operation in 1996. To Soleimani's understanding, even the US wars after 9/11 in Afghanistan and Iraq, both of which border Iran, were related to this mission. They were followed by a concentration of American forces in the region at a scale that had not been seen since WWII. Those troops posed a potential threat to Iran and Syria, two countries that, in Washington's view, belonged to the "axis of evil."

This situation was supposed to give Israel an opportunity to act against Hezbollah, ostensibly to deter Iran and Syria from intervening and taking any action. Soleimani said that Israel, backed by Washington, had planned a surprise war against Hezbollah in advance, and used the abduction of its two soldiers on July 12, 2006 as a pretext to fight the organization rather than to engage in prisoner exchanges, as had occurred in the past.

Soleimani was not the first to suggest this version of history. Even the Syrian minister of defense during the war in 2006, Imad (a rank equivalent to Lieutenant General) Hassan Ali Turkmani, believed it. He presented it in his book on the Second Lebanon War, *The Sixth War*, which was published in Damascus in 2007.³¹ According to Turkmani's book, the war in Lebanon was part of a new American global strategy after the end of the Cold War—the strategy of the war on terror, which was mainly a policy of preventive war. According to him, the events of September 11, 2001 provided a suitable opportunity for the realization of this strategy. Thus did the US go to war in Afghanistan and Iraq. From those bases, Turkmani asserted, the US administration could directly pressure and threaten countries in the region, including Syria and Iran and even launch military confrontations against them with the aim of bringing about a fundamental change in the region. After the occupation of Iraq, Syria and Lebanon were indeed under American pressure to bring about changes to their policies that would serve the American plan to organize a new order in the Middle East.

In his book, Turkmani referred to the inability of the Lebanese government established after the assassination of PM Rafiq Hariri in February 2005 to implement Security Council Resolution 1559 of September 2004, and in particular the provisions relating to the disarming of Hezbollah and Palestinian organizations in Lebanon. As a result, he claims, a joint decision was made by the US, the UK, and Israel to launch a war against Hezbollah. Thus, in 2006, extensive joint training was conducted in Israeli skies, as well as ground training, with the aim of destroying Hezbollah and its capabilities in a ground campaign.

Turkmani claimed that Washington had decided the war should start near the US congressional midterm elections. This was in order to help the Bush administration, as the expected military victory would both increase the American people's support for it and cover the US failure in Iraq. The date was set for October 1, 2006, during Ramadan, to surprise Hezbollah and its leadership as everyone would be on holiday and not at the appropriate level of readiness to wage war.

In Turkmani's estimation, the plan was to strike a heavy blow at Hezbollah's headquarters and forces in such a way that its leadership

would be harmed, most of its power would be destroyed, and it would be off balance from the first day. It was to be similar to the opening move of American forces against Saddam at the beginning of the invasion of Iraq in 2003. The planners hoped to achieve the goals of the war within a week, give or take a few days, and to end the Hezbollah problem in Lebanon.

But then the July 12 event took place. A Hezbollah force attacked an IDF patrol moving along the Lebanese border, killing several soldiers and abducting two others, while shelling a number of settlements as a diversionary operation. In this way, Turkmani argues, Hezbollah thwarted the Israeli plan. He adds that Hezbollah sources confessed that planning for the operation had begun in early 2006 and that the decision to abduct the soldiers had been made three days before it was carried out.

Also, according to Nasrallah in an interview on Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei's website, the Second Lebanon War actually stemmed from an American plot to attack the axis of resistance in the region, specifically the Tehran regime—a plot that was thwarted by “divine providence” when Hezbollah abducted the two soldiers.³²

Nasrallah confirmed what was said by Hassan Turkmani. In an interview with the Lebanese television channel Al-Manar on February 13, 2020,³³ he “revealed” the contents of the letter Soleimani passed to him from Khamenei in the early days of the Second Lebanon War. According to Nasrallah, Khamenei wrote that “Hezbollah’s action in capturing the two Israeli soldiers was one of “God’s acts of kindness... this is because the Americans and Israelis planned to fight against you [Hezbollah] in Lebanon in late summer and early autumn. But the operation to capture the two Israeli soldiers presented them with an existing fact, so they started a war at that time.” According to Khamenei, the difference between the war that took place in July and the one planned for the end of the summer was that “then [at the later date] the Israelis would start a surprise war and for no reason, and would surprise you, and attack and destroy everything Hezbollah has—its bases, houses, and values, and kill its leaders.” Khamenei also supposedly wrote: “When you [Hezbollah] carried out the operation to strike the two soldiers,

and they [the Israelis] were forced to go into confrontation at that time, you took the surprise factor from them, because you were prepared and aware of the Israeli response. Thus, God prevented a great disaster if you were attacked by surprise at the end of the summer in 2006. “

Nasrallah added this about the letter, which he said had been kept secret for 14 years: “The second important thing it had was Khamenei’s reference to the intensity of the war, which he likened to the ‘Battle of the Canal’ (al-Khandak), which the Prophet Muhammad waged against his enemies in 627 AD, when the city of al-Madinah was under siege. ‘These were difficult days for the Prophet and his people, and the citizens; and [as happened then], Hezbollah will win.’”

It is interesting to note that this perception prevailed at the highest levels in Iran. Soleimani too referred to the Battle of the Canal in an interview in October 2019. He said he assisted Nasrallah and Mughniyeh in the 2006 Lebanon war with military advice, similar to the advice given by the person who advised the Prophet Muhammad in the Battle of the Canal; and that as in that battle, in which the Prophet’s power was inferior to that of his enemies, Hezbollah bravely faced its enemy despite its numerical inferiority.

On the other hand, Subhi al-Tufaili, Hezbollah’s first secretary, contradicted this thesis in a statement in November 2006.³⁴ He did not hesitate to condemn Iran for its role in destroying Lebanon. He said, “Israel had no prior plan for the war in Lebanon, and it did not break out by chance or because of the abduction of two reserve soldiers by Hezbollah. As I understand it, Iran had an interest in causing a shock and proving that it could shake the whole world, and shake the capitals and rulers of the Middle East due to what is happening on the lines of confrontation with the Israeli enemy.” With these words, he hinted that Nasrallah himself was interested in inciting civil war in Lebanon.

DIRECT IRANIAN INVOLVEMENT IN THE SECOND LEBANON WAR

Iran under the rule of the ayatollahs considers itself the patron of the Hezbollah organization since its establishment following the first Lebanon war in 1982. Its support for the organization, according to Khamenei, is based on the principles of the revolution and on an ethnic affinity.

According to various sources, the Revolutionary Guards arrived in Lebanon before the abduction of the Israeli soldiers and supervised its execution. Iran trained Hezbollah fighters in its territory, including preparation for their participation in the abduction of the soldiers, and was involved in the Second Lebanon War alongside Hezbollah. Hundreds of Iranian fighters from the Revolutionary Guards operated at Hezbollah outposts in Lebanon, where they launched rockets and missiles at Israel. They also took part in launching an Iranian-made missile at the Hanit missile ship of the Israel Navy. There were reports that some Revolutionary Guards were killed in Lebanon during the war.

Soleimani himself testified in an interview in October 2019 that he arrived in Lebanon from Syria on the day the war broke out, when Imad Mughniyeh helped him avoid being hit by Israeli air strikes.³¹ Soleimani stood beside Mughniyeh in the Dahieh suburb of Beirut, where Hezbollah's Operations Room was located. Mughniyeh waged the war against the IDF from the Operations Room, together with senior Iranian Revolutionary Guards. Soleimani said that after a week, he returned to Iran at the request of Tehran to update the Supreme Leader on the status of the war, and returned to Lebanon the same day with the Leader's letter to Nasrallah in hand. He said he remained there until the end of the war.

Soleimani said he had presented the Leader and other regime members with a negative assessment of Hezbollah's chances of winning the war, which he described as directed not only against Hezbollah but against the entire Shiite community in Lebanon. He described the conduct of the war by Hezbollah from the Operations Room in Dahieh, and the sense of danger he and Mughniyeh felt as Israeli bombings approached their building and Israeli UAVs (Unmanned Aerial Vehicles) operated above their heads. They decided to move to a safer place and to bring

Nasrallah with them, though he did not want to leave his location. After a few hours they returned to the same place.

According to Soleimani, the period between the 20th and the 28th day of the war was the most difficult for Hezbollah, especially the 27th and 28th days. On some of these days, Nasrallah and Mughniyeh operated from different locations, but they held meetings at night in the presence of Soleimani. During those meetings, Mughniyeh updated Nasrallah on developments and Nasrallah instructed him about next moves. Khamenei and Soleimani consoled themselves with the hope that the war would end well, as did the Battle of the Canal. They both concluded that the abduction of the two Israeli soldiers saved Hezbollah from total destruction by Israel, which planned to take the organization and its infrastructure by surprise and destroy it.

Nasrallah referred to Soleimani's contribution to the war in an interview he gave in February 2020, after Soleimani was killed in Baghdad by the US.³⁵ Nasrallah noted that it was Soleimani who built up Hezbollah's capabilities in 2006 and thereafter, mainly in the field of rocket and missile armament. He also stressed Soleimani's insistence on staying in Lebanon, at Mughniyeh's side, during the war in the company of Hezbollah commanders and forces, despite his being able to operate from Iran or Syria. He said Soleimani's trip to Iran a week after the start of the war, and his meeting in Mashhad with Khamenei and senior members of the regime, was to discuss ways to aid Hezbollah in the war.

According to Nasrallah, Hezbollah was on high alert and prepared for the war, and Soleimani's presence provided an important psychological and moral contribution to the organization and its fighters, who were under severe mental pressure during the fighting. Soleimani took care to provide Hezbollah with everything it needed during the war. He was in daily contact with Khamenei and informed him of what was happening. Iranian support during the war was clearly very important to Hezbollah, psychologically and morally. Iranian support was also essential in view of the damage done to the organization in terms of casualties and material and financial damage.

Soleimani was a partner in the main operations decisions in the war. It was he who set the equation for a response to enemy bombings: Tel Aviv would be attacked by missiles if Beirut was bombed. Nasrallah reiterated this in a television interview on the Day of the Martyrs' Leaders on February 16, 2010: "If you destroy buildings in Dahieh, we will destroy buildings in Tel Aviv... I tell the Israelis: if you attack the international airport in Beirut, we will strike Ben-Gurion Airport in Tel Aviv. If you attack our ports, we will attack your ports ...".³⁶ According to Soleimani, the enemy kept this rule in mind and did not bomb Beirut (apparently the Dahieh bombing was not included in the equation), so Hezbollah did not launch missiles at Tel Aviv. He said that despite the indiscriminate bombings that Israel inflicted on Dahieh, it did not hit the organization's Operations Room. Nor did it hit Nasrallah, Mughniyeh, Soleimani, or any other Iranian officials who were in the area.

From all this, it appears that Iran, represented in the war by the commander of the Revolutionary Guards' al-Quds Force, Qassem Soleimani, prepared Hezbollah for battle and assisted it throughout with money, materiel, operational advice, and strategic policy. Soleimani was undoubtedly involved in all of it. He was in Syria before the abduction, awaiting the Israeli response, and then arrived in Lebanon, though he could more safely have conducted the entire operation from Syria or even from Iran. Nasrallah praised Soleimani for his contribution to Hezbollah, describing him not only as a military leader but as a man with great political and strategic vision who conducted the war with the determination needed to lead to Hezbollah's victory.

Both Nasrallah and Soleimani used their interviews to create and disseminate myths about the 2006 war and the axis of resistance. Both attributed a divine holy vision to Ali Khamenei, claiming that Iran's Supreme Leader had predicted Hezbollah's victory over Israel since the beginning of the war. Both took the opportunity to advance the myth that Hezbollah had managed to establish an invincible army against Israel, and did so while facing a broader regional program led by America. According to Nasrallah, he was told by Khamenei that the war would end well for Hezbollah—that it would become a "regional power"—and sure enough, "that is what happened." Soleimani similarly defined the 2006 war: "Not just a victory but a turning point in Hezbollah's broader conflict with Israel."³⁷

A “SMOKING GUN”?

The information that Tehran ordered Hezbollah to carry out the abduction of the Israeli soldiers in order to relieve the pressure exerted on Iran on the nuclear issue can be thought of as a “smoking gun.” The evidence presented above supports the theory that Iran initiated, knew about, and was involved in every stage of the war that erupted following the abduction of the soldiers. This counters the version presented by Hezbollah’s secretary general, Nasrallah, who was quoted after the war as saying that if he had known what Israel’s response was going to be to the abductions he would have refrained from ordering them, and that the harsh Israeli response surprised him.

Those statements were intended for domestic purposes. They were meant for the Lebanese government and the Lebanese public, neither of which accepted the extensive destruction caused to the country following the Hezbollah operation.

Commentators have pointed to the “coincidence” between the abduction of the Israeli soldiers and the failure of the nuclear talks between Iran and the EU. They have also referred to the failure of the international community to implement Security Council Resolutions 1696 on the cessation of the Iranian nuclear project and 1701 on the disarmament of Hezbollah, which was adopted at the end of the Second Lebanon War. To their understanding, this is proof of Iran’s success at operating in the Lebanese arena in the summer of 2006 for the purpose of stemming the pressure exerted upon it to disrupt the progress of its military nuclear program.

IMPLICATIONS FOR TODAY

There is a great similarity between the four-member hostility—Iran and Hezbollah versus the US and Israel—in 2006 and its current situation on the Iranian nuclear issue and Hezbollah’s activities. There remains an ongoing confrontation between Washington and Jerusalem on one side and Tehran on the other about Iranian nuclear ambitions. The hostility between the US and Iran increased when Trump announced on May 8, 2018 that he had decided to impose sanctions on Iran. It

intensified over the past year almost to the point of war, due to the crisis in the Persian Gulf and following the assassination of Soleimani.

As for the direct confrontation between Israel and Iran, Iran has succeeded in developing ballistic missiles that can carry nuclear warheads with a range of about 2,000 km. If Iran comes to possess nuclear warheads for those missiles, that will represent an existential threat to the State of Israel. The Iranians want to establish capabilities in Syria through Shiite-Syrian militias operated by Hezbollah members to hit IDF forces and Israeli citizens on the Golan border, and they are striving to create a continuous bridge between their country and Hezbollah in Lebanon. These efforts have failed so far due to the many attacks, allegedly by the Israeli Air Force according to foreign sources, against Iranian forces and Shiite militias throughout Syria.

Hezbollah's high precision missiles project, which began in 2013, is another Iranian military effort against Israel. In Iran's view, the project is a defense and deterrence measure in the face of possible attack by Israel on Iran's nuclear facilities. At first, Tehran sent Iranian precision-guided missiles through Syria, but most of those shipments were thwarted by air strikes by the Israeli Air Force. As an alternative, the Iranians began producing precision missiles in 2016 at the CERS Institute of the Syrian Military Industry, which is engaged in the development of weapons with an emphasis on missiles and rockets. It appears that the Israeli Air Force is also working successfully to thwart that effort.

Recently, a series of mysterious explosions took place in Iran, raising the question of whether Israel and the US were involved. The first blast occurred on June 26, 2020 at the Hojir rocket and missile fuels production plant near the Parchin military compound. It will be recalled that at the Parchin complex, Iran conducted intensive activity in its drive to develop nuclear weapons. Another dramatic incident occurred on July 2 at the Natanz uranium enrichment plant. The explosion and subsequent fire severely damaged a workshop for the-development and assembly of uranium enriching advanced centrifuges, a project that is the flagship of the Iranian nuclear program.

Although Iran has threatened to hold Israel and the US directly responsible, it has not yet taken action against them in response to these events. However, the Iranian Foreign Ministry spokesman warned that “any country which will be held responsible for the explosion at a nuclear enrichment center in Natanz... should expect a strong Iranian retaliation.” It should be emphasized that the recent events occurred at a particularly bad time for the Tehran regime, which is struggling to cope with an economic collapse due to American sanctions; the plague of COVID-19, which is hitting the Iranian people hard; and the country’s military failures against the IDF in Syria.

The Lebanese economy has also deteriorated sharply, largely as a result of Iran’s gross mismanagement of the country via the Hezbollah leadership. This country, which for many years was considered the most liberal in the Arab world, is facing one of the worst crises in its history. In the face of this crisis, criticism from the Lebanese people is intensifying not only about its failed government, but also about Hezbollah, which many consider largely responsible for the terrible situation. However, the deterioration of the Lebanese economy is having a severe impact on Hezbollah as well. Moreover, due to the many economic sanctions that the Trump administration has imposed on Iran since 2018, it is currently having difficulty assisting the organization financially.

On the level of Israel’s conduct vis-à-vis Hezbollah, on the night of July 20, 2020, a member of the organization was killed at the Damascus airport during an attack by the Israeli Air Force. The attack was carried out following the landing in the field of an Iranian cargo plane that reportedly had flown an advanced combat system from Iran to Syria that was intended for Hezbollah. The organization announced that one of its people had been killed in the attack. This resulted in concern in Israel that the Lebanese border might heat up due to possible revenge attacks by Hezbollah. Nasrallah made this statement: “There is a clear message for everyone—the reaction equation exists with Israel, and we do not intend to change the laws,”³⁸ which implies that Israeli harm to Hezbollah, even in Syrian territory, will result in a Hezbollah action against Israel.

Israel was therefore in a hurry to send a message to Hezbollah that it had not intended to eliminate any of its members. In an interview conducted by Naim Qassem, Nasrallah's deputy, on the Lebanese Al-Mayadeen channel on July 26,³² he ruled out the possibility of a new war between Israel and Hezbollah. It is possible, however, Naim Qassem's words reflected the organization's financial difficulties.

Hezbollah did appear to seek revenge for the killing of one of its men in Damascus on July 20, but did so in a move that can be considered symbolic, with low potential for escalation into war. The move was apparently taken to demonstrate that Nasrallah's "reaction equation" was still valid. On July 27, a small squad of Hezbollah militants tried to cross the border into Israeli territory in the area of Har Dov, but the attempted infiltration was immediately spotted and the squad repulsed by IDF forces. The incident ended with no casualties on either side.

There is still uncertainty about the possibility of further Hezbollah responses to the killing of one of its men. It is possible that in view of its difficult position, strong public pressure in Lebanon will suffice to hold the organization back from carrying out another attack. On the other hand, it is possible that Hezbollah is determined to take revenge on the IDF and that its very distress will push it to carry out another strike. If so, it will probably choose a method with minimal potential for escalation.

However, the current state of deterioration in both Iran and Lebanon must be taken into account. Consider also that ever since the conclusion of the Second Lebanon War in 2006, Nasrallah has preferred to stay safe in his underground bunker in Dahieh. Add to that the huge explosion on August 4 in Beirut Port, for which many Lebanese hold Hezbollah responsible. Added together, these elements suggest that the probability of a new war between Israel and Hezbollah in the near future is quite low.

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