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Iran has Hezbollah's back

It was hardly a coincidence that Iranian Revolutionary Guard officials, including a senior general, were killed in Sunday's strike in Quneitra, near the Israel-Syria border. The Revolutionary Guard has been overseeing Hezbollah evolution since its inception in 1982, which was also the work of Tehran.

As part of its efforts to form Hezbollah, Iran sent over 1,500 Revolutionary Guard soldiers to Lebanon. The Iranian unit was tasked with creating Hezbollah's military framework, and offered its operatives spiritual guidance and military training, teaching them the basics of guerrilla warfare, terrorism, and even aerial and naval warfare.

The Revolutionary Guard also played a key role in the formation of Hezbollah's doctrine, and its adaptation to dealing with the Israeli military. This included counseling Hezbollah on its routine operations, as well as analyzing and learning from its clashes with the IDF.

Over time, the Iranian unit was reduced to only several hundred troops. The scope of Hezbollah's operations against the IDF diminished significantly following Israel's withdrawal from southern Lebanon in 2000, and following 2006's Second Lebanon War, but Iran has always been there for Hezbollah.

The Revolutionary Guard was not the only tool Iran has used to cultivate Hezbollah. Tehran, alongside Syria, has been serving as Hezbollah's main supplier for advanced weapons, ensuring it could generate its own deterrence against Israel, and that it could withstand conflict, if and when it flares up. In doing so Iran has sought to cement its own deterrence against Israel, as it perceived Hezbollah as its front line of defense against Israel.

Iran may be 1,000 kilometers away, but it has managed to manufacture significant military presence on our border, as well as the ability to attack without actual risk to itself. Hezbollah deterrence is based on its arsenal of Iranian and Syrian rockets and missiles, which number tens of thousands. This is how Iran has made it clear that if Israel strikes its nuclear facilities, it would employ, among other things, Hezbollah as part of its retaliation.

The Syrian civil war and the precarious position of President Bashar Assad's regime pose difficult dilemmas for Iran.

In 2012, when it seemed that Assad's days in power were numbered, Iran dispatched hundreds of Revolutionary Guard personnel to Damascus, providing the embattled president with counsel, weapons, training and equipment, but apparently this force was not used in fighting -- that was reserved for Hezbollah, which followed Iran's orders and sent thousands of operatives to fight alongside Assad's troops.

Iran's involvement in the Syrian civil war drew criticism from the Arab world, but it was Hezbollah that paid the price: Not only was it the subject of harsh criticism in Lebanon, it has also lost hundreds of operatives in battle.

The killing of Hezbollah operatives and Revolutionary Guard soldiers in Sunday's incident posed a difficult problem for both. On the one hand, it would be difficult for them to opt for containment rather than retaliation, but on the other hand, such retaliation may spiral into a conflict neither is interested in, especially at this time, when both are busy fighting both the rebels and the Islamic State group in Syria.

Iran will have the final say on the matter, and all options are on the table, but it is possible that Tehran's statement that it will retaliate at a time and place of its choosing, means it is in hurry to do so.

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