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HEZBOLLAH: Political, Financial Turmoil Will Likely Refocus Operations Domestically

Summary: The Lebanese Hezbollah will likely refocus towards resolving domestic issues and reduce its operational capabilities abroad as a result of changing Iranian military leadership and growing political volatility in Lebanon. Hezbollah may also direct foreign operations towards developing its connection with criminal enterprises in South America, eliciting financial and human capital with minimal political or constitutional resistance.

Establishment and Political Sentiment: A group of Shiite clerics formed Hezbollah as a sectarian militia following a wave of Palestinian immigration and the Israeli invasion of southern Lebanon in 1982 with the support of Shia-majority Iran. Hezbollah remained armed following the end of the Lebanese civil war, despite Syria's enforcement of the 1989 Taif disarmament agreement, establishing it as a lasting political and social force in Lebanon. It sustains energetic political and social wings that function domestically to foster support and a military wing that operates abroad largely as a proxy of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps Quds Force (IRGC-QF).

Domestic Political Control: In October 2019, anti-government protests began in Lebanon that demonstrate growing disillusionment with foreign spending and sluggish economic growth and undermine Hezbollah's influence, despite its strong political presence and control of 13 seats in the 128-member parliament. Hezbollah has sought to bolster its popular support through social services, including building infrastructure, providing health-care, and supporting youth groups, but its support continues to diminish as anti-regime protests sustain.

Enduring Iranian Partnership: The relationship between Iran and Hezbollah likely entered a strained state following the 3 January killing of the IRGC-QF Major General Qassem Soleimani and its leadership transition to Esmail Ghaani, potentially diminishing cooperation in the future. Hezbollah conducts terrorist and military operations such as suicide bombings and targeted assassinations as well as training and logistical support to militias in Iraq, Syria, and Yemen. It continues to prove itself as the IRGC-QF's most valuable investment, operating covertly on behalf of Iran to exploit instability, expand regional influence, and combat Salafist extremists, Western nations, and Israel in the Middle East.

Developing Terror-Crime Nexus: Hezbollah probably has potential to further exploit its presence in the Lebanese diaspora of the Tri-Border area (TBA) of Argentina, Brazil, and Paraguay via operational cells and developing connections to criminal activity to supplement its terrorist operations in the Middle East. Instability and the lack of effective law enforcement in the TBA enable Hezbollah to smuggle drugs, launder money, recruit operatives, and cultivate intelligence. Hezbollah coordinates its South American activities through Brazil, sending agents and supplies to expand criminal affairs and support its terrorist operations.

Outlook and Implications: Growing political and economic strife in Lebanon in combination with diminishing support of Hezbollah's operations in Syria, Iraq, and Yemen will likely

contract its overseas capabilities, signaling an era of reticence. Anti-regime protests will likely continue, intensifying polarized sectarianism and aggressive anti-West rhetoric and inciting substantial opposition amongst the Christian and Sunni population. Despite the potential for increasing antagonism, Hezbollah will likely remain resolute in its political activities but may refocus its actions domestically to salvage internal approval.

Esmail Ghaani may prove himself incapable of maintaining the IRGC-QF's support of Hezbollah, likely impairing Iran's ability to project influence through its proxy network. Ghaani's ability to provide Hezbollah with adequate support for its operations will determine whether Hezbollah will rely more heavily on other allies, consequentially changing the aim of Hezbollah's actions. Additionally, diminishing support for the war in Syria amongst Hezbollah's base will likely compromise its relationship with Iran, which restricts its political goals, operational mobility, and paramilitary actions.

The potential shift of focus towards domestic issues and away from assisting Iran may direct Hezbollah's efforts to build its network in South America, which offers political and operational freedom. Progressively severe counterterrorism and counternarcotic efforts by the nations of the TBA may pressure Hezbollah into expanding its enterprises in the border region of Chile, Peru, and Bolivia to exploit law enforcement ineffectiveness and well-established criminal and drug activity. Hezbollah's proximity to western enemies may enable retaliation for the West's actions in the Middle East, but its paramilitary capabilities against Western targets will likely remain limited.

[Riley Coder and Tim Fergus]

KYRGYZSTAN: Government Cancels Chinese Investment Project Amid Protests

Summary: The Kyrgyz government canceled a Chinese infrastructure project on 24 February due to massive protests, signaling that anti-Chinese sentiment will likely stall any of Beijing's future projects in the country.

Development: On 24 February, the government of Kyrgyzstan announced its decision to cancel a \$257 million Chinese investment project to build a major logistics center in eastern Kyrgyzstan. This announcement followed major protests against China's increasing investment in the country. Protests over the logistics center project began in January 2020, following similar incidents in 2019. August 2019 saw violence erupt between Kyrgyz villagers and Chinese employees at a Chinese-owned mine in eastern Kyrgyzstan. Anti-Chinese sentiment in Kyrgyzstan increased due to reports of persecution of ethnic Kyrgyz and Kazakh people along with Uighurs in the Xinjiang region in China.

Analysis: As long as the status quo in Xinjiang continues, anti-Chinese sentiment in Kyrgyzstan will almost certainly persist. China's negative reception in Kyrgyzstan could signal a possible strain in relations with other Central Asian nations that are also largely Muslim. Although many regions in Kyrgyzstan and Central Asia need infrastructure projects to bolster local economies, protests against Beijing's aid will likely deter local governments from accepting Chinese project proposals. Protests will likely continue as Kyrgyz people may view increased Chinese investment as a way for Beijing to encroach on Kyrgyz territory. Kyrgyzstan will almost certainly reject any other large infrastructure projects or investment proposals from China due to protests, likely slowing down economic growth regionally in the short-term.

[Gianna Geiger]

IRAN: Conservative Parliament Victory Will Likely Hurt President Rouhani's Standing

Summary: A conservative parliament victory in Iran amid public distrust of Tehran due to a strained economy, international pressure, and harsh anti-protest operations will likely undermine President Hassan Rouhani.

Development: On 21 February, voters in Iran elected a primarily conservative parliament with the lowest voter turnout rates since the 1979 Islamic Revolution. The newly elected officials largely support Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei and the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). The public's dissatisfaction results partly from the strong economic sanctions placed on Iran and the government's lack of initiative to better the peoples' current position. The reformist platform lost many potential candidates due to mass disqualifications before the election, and many voters turned away from the reformists. Rouhani strove for more involvement with the West, while conservatives favor greater national independence and resistance to international intervention.

Analysis: The new conservative parliament's increased support for Khamenei and the IRGC will likely consolidate Iranian political power for the theocracy. Rouhani's reelection campaign in 2021 will likely fail due to opposition to cooperation with the West and frustration with the reformist platform. Iran's primarily conservative government will probably seek to further Iran's national independence and sever ties with the West, furthering political tension with Western nations and harsher economic sanctions. Tehran will likely face further frustration from citizens, creating more political and civil unrest in Iran.

[Timothy Fergus, Mitchell Pettit, and Rachel Stoneking]

SAUDI ARABIA: Airstrikes Likely to Further Humanitarian Crisis, Regional Instability

Summary: Riyadh launched missiles into Yemen, resulting in numerous civilian casualties. These types of military actions will likely perpetuate the humanitarian crisis in war-torn Yemen and further destabilize the region.

Development: On 15 February, Riyadh killed 30 civilians and injured 12 critically in a missile strike in al-Jawf, Yemen in retaliation for the downing of a Saudi fighter jet claimed by Ansar Allah. The air raids came hours after the downing of a Saudi fighter jet in the al-Jawf province. The U.N representative for human rights called the act “deplorable” and “shocking.” The coalition of Riyadh and Abu Dhabi intervened in 2015 to aid the internationally recognized Yemeni government in fighting the Tehran-aligned Houthi Rebels. Many nations view the Yemeni Civil War as a proxy conflict between Saudi-UAE and Tehran.

Analysis: Riyadh’s missile strikes will likely perpetuate the ongoing humanitarian crisis in Yemen and exacerbate famine and disease with lacking resources to combat. The Saudi-UAE coalition’s attempts to aid the Yemeni government and expel the Houthi rebels are likely covert attempts to combat and establish regional dominance against Tehran. Sustained coalition bombing of Yemen will likely prompt the Yemeni people to rely on the international community to provide resources and programs to mitigate the humanitarian crisis.

[Emma Rash]

IRAQ: Islamic State Will Likely Resurge Due to Political Turmoil and Instability

Summary: Increasing socio-political and economic tension in Iraq exposes a number of vulnerabilities that the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) will likely exploit for recruitment and operations.

Development: On 14 February, the Iraqi-Kurdish Prime Minister Masrour Barzani announced that ISIS reassembled itself with higher numbers than its rise in 2014. The terror group sustains attacks in local areas to establish a foothold in Iraq and Syria for recruitment. The most recent quarterly report from the lead Inspector General for Operation Inherent Resolve assessed that the October 2019 death of ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi did not interrupt the group's organizational structure or operations.

Analysis: Socio-economic instability will likely contribute to porous borders, enable low-level insurgency tactics, and facilitate ISIS's growth. Domestic political turmoil and a shifting warzone will likely restrict state security forces' ability to protect Iraq's borders, military bases, embassies, and local populations. ISIS will almost certainly leverage budget negotiations, refugees, and foreign sanctions to garner support from Iraqi citizens. The group will likely use its newfound recruitment base and foothold to attack critical infrastructure within Iraq and Syria, expanding its territorial control, garnering support from the people, and sparking a strong militaristic response.

[Zac Sorrell]

CHINA: Labor Shortages Amid Quarantine May Strain Global Economy

Summary: Production lines in China continue to function under capacity due to millions of quarantined migrant laborers with strict travel restrictions, leading to a global economic recession.

Development: On 13 February, Chinese authorities ordered factories to restart production due to concerns that the prolonged hiatus from COVID-19 virus quarantines continues to threaten economic growth. 21.3% of migrant workers returned to the cities where they work on down from 84.9% in 2019. Companies such as GM, Fiat Chrysler, and Apple reported labor and resource shortages from the lack of production. Following pressure from the central government to return to work, regional Chinese authorities issued strict guidelines on handling incoming workers to minimize the spread of the virus.

Analysis: Labor shortages in Chinese manufacturing will likely strain the global economy due to possible shortage of manufactured goods. This labor shortage will likely continue to impact supply chains globally as many businesses source components of products from China. Factories will also likely remain cautious about returning to full production to avoid potential outbreaks. Workers returning to factories without proper quarantine pose a risk for furthering the spreading of COVID-19, despite guidelines from authorities. As a result, factories will likely remain slow to return to full production due to fears of the virus, likely slowing down the greater global economy and manufacturing processes.

[Thomas Nadziejka]

This is a global intelligence briefing prepared by the students of the Global Security and Intelligence Studies program at Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University in Prescott, Arizona. The views expressed in this briefing are those of the students, not the university.

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For questions or comments, contact Editor in Chief Riley Coder at editorsee@gmail.com or Eagle Eye Faculty Advisor Dale Avery at (928) 777-4708