

Russia's Potential Alliance with Hizbollah: A Strategic Challenge for the EU in the Eastern Mediterranean

Bernard Siman

One year on, the debate has been dominated by Israel, Hizbollah and the potential for regional war in the Middle East. An additional credible scenario has been worryingly absent: that in which Hizbollah and Russia cooperate, not necessarily to the exclusion of Iran as a third leg in a tripartite alliance. This scenario combines geography, history and geopolitics to bring Hizbollah and Russia closer together as a force to recon with. This is a possible development in the Southern Neighbourhood and the Levant that the EU needs to take seriously. Missing Russia's potential move on Hizbollah could be a historic omission.

The decapitation of Hizbollah's chain of command that preceded the ground incursion, and Iran's feeble reaction to the devastating assault on its Lebanese proxy, have created a new geopolitical vacuum and reality in the Eastern Mediterranean. Russia may spot an opportunity in the misfortunes of Hizbollah and move on a weakened prey.

Will Russia's direct influence return to Beirut for the first time since the 1770s when it occupied the city for a few months following the naval defeat of the Ottoman fleet at the battle of Cheshme? It is a distinct possibility, especially given Iran's lukewarm military response, and one that the EU, and member states, must be prepared to deal with, if not pre-empt and prevent.

RUSSIA'S APPETITE FOR PROXIES IS VAST: HIZBOLLAH WILL FIT NICELY IN ITS PORTFOLIO

A weakened and disoriented Hizbollah reminds one of the 17th-century Japanese tale of the "47 Ronin": 47 Samurai

roaming the country with no overlord following the murder of their feudal lord, seeking to avenge his murder. Without an immediate "new Lord", they are torn between their old loyalties on the one hand, and the realities of having to survive in an unforgiving environment and battle spaces on the other. The Japanese Ronin ended up committing collective suicide after avenging their erstwhile Lord and Master. It is unlikely that Hizbollah's fighters will choose a similar fate.

The Israeli decisive and targeted operations, eliminating most of the high command of Hizbollah whilst maiming thousands of its leading cadre following the exploding paggers and air strike operations, effectively made Ronins of Hizbollah's fighters. Israel, however, did not destroy the structures of the group, nor its ability to regroup in some shape in the future. The Hizbollah fighters are no Ronins seeking to commit suicide. They will be looking for reliable sponsors and supporters perhaps in addition to their main backer, Iran.

In fact, what Israel has been doing for decades is akin to an old, and effective, Ottoman control strategy: every few years the authorities "beat the rebellious groups hard on the head", as the Arab saying goes. Such a strategy kept these groups' rebellions manageable. As time goes by and these groups re-organise and gather strength, the authorities will then send in the army or the levies to oppress them again. And so, it went on for 400 years. Proxies were essential tools. These were the various levy forces the Ottomans created from ethnic or religious groups. However, unlike the Ronins and the rebellious groups of times past, Hizbollah fighters and cadres are most likely to seek enhanced and fresh support and

patronage. Combining the powerful Shiite narrative and its control mechanisms with Russia's Hybrid and kinetic capabilities may well present a historic opportunity through a tripartite alliance of common interest and convenience between Hezbollah, Iran and Russia.

To put it in stark terms: Russia is likely to take advantage of Iran's and Hezbollah's weakness to entrench its presence in the Eastern Mediterranean and Levant, beyond its presence and influence in Syria. If it offers Hezbollah (and Iran) a deal to keep the group going as a Russo-Iranian proxy, influenced this time also by Russia's priorities, it will have achieved a spectacular outcome for itself out of the recent developments in the Levant.

THE CURRENT IRANIAN STATE SYSTEM SUFFERS FROM THREE SEVERE STRESS POINTS

The first stress point is the fact that the Axis of Resistance, particularly post the assassination of ex-Quds Force Commander Qassim Suleimani, has failed on so many fronts. In particular, Israel's deep penetration of the various hierarchies of the Axis groups has brought the ambition of the Iranian regime to become the regional leader into question. In the Middle East, jokes abound about the state of Iranian power. Humour in the Middle East can have very serious adverse political consequences. The "one for all and all for one" solemn undertaking, NATO style, has clearly not worked out. Moreover, Iran deemed Hezbollah to be too valuable to be wasted on Hamas. Hezbollah was, until the recent devastating Israeli attacks, considered to be Iran's main deterrence in the absence of its nuclear weapons. What is probably riling Iran's proxies and partners in Yemen, Syria, Iraq, and Lebanon is the clear contradiction between their own agendas and interests, and the fact that, for Iran, they have been nothing more than "shields" in its own narrow national and theocratic interest. The use of Shiism in pursuit of Farsi nationalist aims goes back a long way, the same way orthodox Christianity has been so often deployed by Russia over the centuries.

The second is the possible outright unbridgeable internal disagreements regarding the nuclear deal. The latest round

of meetings between President Masoud Pezeshkian and western leaders at the UN may have exacerbated those disagreements, and possibly a perception has developed that Iran projected weakness through the round of talks. Iran, after all, has domestic politics like other states, and in autocracies these disagreements often lead to undermining the foundations of the state. Admittedly this is a long-term process, and the Iranian regime may well continue to survive through sheer brutality. But it is also structurally weakened perhaps beyond repair through the perception of impotence and weakness. Demographics, i.e. the overwhelming youthfulness of Iranian society, moreover, is a direct threat to the regime requiring the regime to employ increasing brutality. This is not a recipe for stability.

The third stress point is the economy and Iran's continued funding capacity. Proxies and partners require a strong Iranian economy and cash flows. This is distinctly not the case. Inflation is running at above 33%, the economy's key vulnerability is the overwhelming dependence on oil revenue in a volatile maritime and geopolitical zone, and unemployment runs at least 20%. Oil can only be sold through smuggling, and trading can only take place in circumvention of tight sanctions. The dependence of Iran's proxies and partners on being funded by Iran is a key vulnerability in their relationship with their benefactor that is now being tested and compounded by the perception of Iran's weakness. It is not unthinkable that, whilst retaining their strong (and in the case of Hezbollah symbiotic relationship) with Iran, they will be looking for an additional sponsor that can plug the financing and armament gap. Russia could play this role, providing it with additional tentacles of influence across the Eastern Mediterranean, Red Sea and the Middle East.

The perceived weakness of Iran, and the decimation of Hezbollah's command structure, are unlikely to go unnoticed by the forces that revolted against President Bashar Al Assad. Russia has an interest in maintaining control over Syria. Hezbollah will most likely be looking for an opportunity to reassert its credentials as an effective, organised and lethal fighting organisation. The incentives for a tripartite alliance, that between Iran, Hezbollah and Russia, may well prove too attractive for all three to let go of.

IRAN'S ROLE IN SYRIA TO WEAKEN, RUSSIA'S TO STRENGTHEN: EU MUST ACT AND RESPOND

Russia and Iran have competed for control and influence in Syria ever since they both supported President Bashar Al Assad against the various groups that emerged in 2011 in the revolts against his rule. Hizbollah, and the multinational Shiite militias, were deployed and played a decisive (and Syrian opposition says brutal) role in successfully defending the Syrian government.

So did the Russians. Lest we forget: when President Obama reneged on his threat to use force against the government of Al Assad's because of its use of chemical weapons (the famous "Syria Red Lines"), Russia saw this as its moment to gain valuable military presence in a key Middle East state and acquire a warm water naval port. Russia's institutional memory retains the bitterness, caused by the fact that the Soviet Communists, after the October Revolution of 1917, abandoned its share of the spoils of the Middle East after the fall of the Ottoman Empire and the end of WW1. Establishing a foothold in the warm water basins had been a key geostrategic objective since the 1770s under Catherine the Great. Russia has both a naval station at Tartous and an air base at Hmeimim, both in Syria, on and close to the Mediterranean coast respectively.

However, they have had to share that influence with Iran. Now is the opportunity for Russia to dominate Syria and potentially Lebanon, through de facto adding Hizbollah into its portfolio of proxies. Such an arrangement will also open the door to cooperate with other Iranian proxies in the region.

WHY IS HIZBOLLAH A GOOD FIT FOR RUSSIA'S PROXY PORTFOLIO?

In many ways, Hizbollah is another version of the Wagner Group/Africa Corps. It is extremely well organised, disciplined, armed, battle-hardened and agile. It has a global network of legal and illegal businesses. It is also present in Western and Central Africa, an area of active interest and presence for Russian proxies and

actors. Hizbollah has very active funding, trading and laundering structures in west Africa in particular due to the presence of large, and historically entrenched Lebanese diaspora communities. It may well be tempted to reach a grand bargain (together with its hitherto main state sponsor, Iran) with its potential sponsor to be, Russia. Russia will be able to use Hizbollah's muscle in Lebanon and potentially in Syria (and in Iraq), as well as to utilise its global network, in return for continuing to arm it and provide it with support and overall cover. This arrangement would potentially also solidify the Russo-Iranian relations that have grown exponentially through trade and by circumventing sanctions, as well as through military cooperation, particularly as Iran supplies Russia with its shahid drones.

WHERE DOES THAT LEAVE THE EU? TIME IS OF THE ESSENCE

For the EU to have looked primarily east, in the confrontation with Russia in its illegal war of aggression against Ukraine, was to create a geopolitical or strategic blindspot to the south and in the Eastern Mediterranean. This is because Russia's line of confrontation stretches along its geographic expanse from the Baltics all the way south to Turkey and Iran. The line of confrontation with Russia in reality runs along the Eurasian Spine linking east of the EU with both its southern and maritime flanks. The Baltic, Black and Mediterranean/Red Seas are all linked from Russia's strategic perspective. The reality on the ground shows that Russia has been successful in establishing a sphere of interest in Africa, as well as in the Eastern Mediterranean. Iran's "axis of Resistance", on the other hand, envelopes its so called "Ring of Fire", embracing the Gulf in a deadly embrace. The simple question to jog the EU's focus further south from its eastern flank is: what's north of Iran? (No prizes for guessing. It's Russia!).

It would make, therefore, strategic sense for Russia to try to develop and deepen its influence over this vast network that is geographically and strategically already extremely well located and organised, offering both kinetic as well as Hybrid capabilities. It also enhances Russo-Iranian ties and cooperation.



For its part, Iran will undoubtedly be unenthusiastic about such a Russian move, which undermines its influence, particularly in Syria and Lebanon. But this may just be a case of “needs must”. Iraq’s flag ship development plans for a land middle trade corridor, from the Gulf to Turkey, may also be undermined. This is one of these pivotal moments in which one power ascends while the other one sees continuity and survival as vital, if not existential, interests. Hizbollah may now be in that position. Iran, for its part, seems unable to match metal to rhetoric. This cannot be good news for its proxies and partners.

The EU must urgently consider its strategic options in the Eastern Mediterranean and the Levant, beyond the focus on humanitarian crises that will undoubtedly unfold. It must resist the temptation to focus almost exclusively on terrorism and migration. The EU must resist narrowing its focus. It will have to act with a strategic, rather than knee-jerk tactical, mindset. Its focus must combine its Ukraine strategy on the one hand with its Eastern Mediterranean options in an integrated strategy, given that the common denominators are Russia, geography and history. There is no room any longer for partial or tunnel visions, because none of these denominators has a forgiving nature.

To miss Russia’s potential move on Hizbollah will be a historic omission of incalculable consequences, also for Ukraine. The EU will then not only have to deal, to its east and south, with either Russian forces and influence, or its proxies; but also it will have to deal with enhanced Russian activities and influence in the Eastern Mediterranean and along the Red Sea all the way to Yemen, where the Houthis, partners of Iran, have been posing direct threats to European and international maritime security. The Red Sea trade maritime route and geopolitical zone, through Bab El Mandeb and Suez, will acquire, should this scenario come to pass, a heavy dose of Russian influence.

This will be a geopolitical earthquake for Europe. It will have to deal, in addition to the Russian menace on its eastern and southern flanks (utilising proxies and leading to the EU’s loss of influence in Sahel), with a quasi-Russian proxy in the Eastern Mediterranean, in Lebanon and Syria. These activities are very close to the EU. In fact, it is barely

300km from Cyprus, an EU member state. Such presence will also impact the EU’s plans for energy supplies from the offshore gas fields in the Eastern Mediterranean, off the coast of Lebanon. It is also dangerously close to the Suez Canal, enhancing the importance of Egypt to the EU’s overall peace and security. Turkey, for very good reasons, is unlikely to remain an observer and might well take concrete strategic steps in Syria-Lebanon to secure its interests should Russia make its move on Lebanon. There could well be a common EU-Turkish transactional interest to deter such a move and to pre-empt it.

This is the time for the EU to think in hard terms about interests and influence. It is also the time to transform the Global Gateway into a hard-nosed strategic geopolitical and foreign policy instrument. A practical concrete measure would be to support the development of the sea-to-land Iraq Middle Corridor, which is also a Turkish priority, opening the door for further cooperation with Turkey, as an added strategic resilience component for the EU’s trade and its supply chains. In addition, strongly enhancing the security of Cyprus and Egypt must become key EU strategic objectives as expressions of the drive for enlightened European self-interest. Hizbollah has already threatened to attack Cyprus with missiles because of its ties with Israel. The domestic security threats to EU member states should not be underestimated: such an alliance will strengthen the state-backed terrorist-criminal axis and attendant threats.

There is no time to waste to secure the EU’s vital interests in the Eastern Mediterranean, and in Lebanon in particular. As we keep repeating: Hope is not a strategy, and concern is not a policy! The EU is already playing in injury time and it urgently needs to start scoring strategic goals.

Bernard Siman, O.B.E., is a Senior Associate Fellow in the Europe in the World Programme at Egmont Institute.





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