

# Iran's Axis of Resistance

## In Review

November 8 – December 6, 2021

### Accelerated Saudi Pressure Campaign Threatens Lebanese Hezbollah

By Zach Coles

**Saudi Arabia's accelerating pressure campaign against the Lebanese government threatens to weaken Lebanese Hezbollah's voter support and influence within the country's governing coalition prior to the 2022 election.** An unfavorable election outcome for Lebanese Hezbollah could fragment the March 8 Alliance political coalition it controls. In addition to buttressing domestic support and consolidating control over the March 8 Alliance, Lebanese Hezbollah may pursue kinetic operations against Saudi targets to erode Riyadh's resolve.

**Saudi Arabia accelerated its pressure campaign against the Lebanese government in October and November of 2021, likely to weaken political support for Lebanese Hezbollah (LH) and the pro-LH March 8 Alliance currently in power.** Saudi Arabia intensified its longstanding economic and diplomatic coercive campaign against the Lebanese government in response to remarks made by LH-aligned Lebanese Information Minister George Kordahi on October 26 that were critical of Saudi Arabia's role in the Yemen war.<sup>1</sup> Saudi Arabia expelled Lebanon's ambassador and banned



Lebanese exports and mail to Saudi Arabia. The United Arab Emirates (UAE) also expelled Lebanon's ambassador, and Kuwait prohibited charitable donations to Lebanon and canceled visas for Lebanese citizens.<sup>2</sup> Kordahi yielded to domestic political pressures and resigned on December 3, 2021.<sup>3</sup> However, Saudi Arabia will likely continue its campaign to further erode Hezbollah influence in the Lebanese government.

**LH likely perceives an electoral defeat as a threat to its role as Lebanon's political powerbroker and a danger to cohesion in the LH-aligned March 8 Alliance.** Saudi messaging has explicitly tied the coercive campaign to confronting the outsized LH influence in the Lebanese government. Lebanese voters are increasingly blaming LH for Lebanon's economic misfortunes.<sup>4</sup> An electoral

defeat for the March 8 Alliance could create incentives for non-LH segments of the bloc to incorporate new, increasingly popular independent and reformist lawmakers into the political coalition to retain a governing majority.<sup>5</sup> Including independent and reformist MPs in the March 8 Alliance would dilute LH control over the political coalition. Alternatively, severely adverse election results for the March 8 Alliance could encourage segments of the group to splinter and form a new coalition or align with the rival March 14 Alliance. Fractures in the March 8 Alliance would jeopardize Hezbollahi political supremacy in Lebanon.

**LH will likely pressure Lebanese political institutions to mitigate the political damage from the Saudi pressure campaign.** LH will likely increase pressure on the Lebanese Constitutional Council to delay the election from March 27 to its originally planned May 8 date. Delaying the election will improve the likelihood of LH recovering political support before the vote. The Lebanese government could improve Lebanon's economic situation before the election by concluding energy transfer deals and IMF debt relief negotiations. However, voters are unlikely to perceive the associated positive economic results until at least several months after the agreements enter into effect. The Lebanese Parliament voted in October to move the election from May to March, but LH and LH-allied MPs filed a lawsuit challenging the constitutionality of the March 27 election date.<sup>6</sup>

**LH may pursue kinetic operations against Saudi targets to compel Saudi Arabia to lift its pressure campaign before the election.** LH maintains a military presence in Yemen to train and advise al-Houthi Movement military personnel in their campaign against Saudi Arabia and the Saudi-backed Yemeni government.<sup>7</sup> LH-affiliated social media accounts have recently advocated for expanding the Hezbollahi presence in Yemen.<sup>8</sup> Hezbollahi willingness to escalate with kinetic operations against Saudi Arabia, however, is dependent on the degree to which LH perceives itself exposed

to political damage from the Saudi campaign in Lebanon. Additional Saudi coercive measures that represent an existential threat to Hezbollahi control of the Lebanese government or the March 8 coalition will encourage LH to act. In a most dangerous scenario, LH may seek to coordinate kinetic operations with the al-Houthi Movement to target senior Saudi leadership or critical infrastructure in Saudi Arabia.

## Iran's Axis of Resistance Activity

**1. Hamas and Lebanese Hezbollah (LH) may increasingly pursue localized revenue generation activities to compensate for new terrorism designations and international constraints on funding streams.** The United Kingdom (UK) designated Hamas' political wing as a terrorist organization on November 19, 2021.<sup>9</sup> Australia similarly designated LH's political wing as a terrorist organization on November 24, 2021.<sup>10</sup> Australia and the UK previously designated the military wings of LH and Hamas as terrorist organizations; the inclusion of political actors in terrorism designations indicates that Western actors are increasingly interpreting the military and political wings of LH and Hamas as interconnected.<sup>11</sup> The designations will block charitable organizations and expatriate communities in the UK and Australia from circumventing terrorism finance laws by solely interacting with the organizations' political elements. LH and Hamas obtain and launder considerable portions of their funding via international entities and will likely struggle to sustain their operations without sufficient revenue from abroad.<sup>12</sup> LH and Hamas may increasingly pursue drug smuggling, public graft, and other localized revenue generation activities to compensate for diminished external funding sources caused by the new terrorist designations and sanctions.

**2. Iran's Iraqi proxies rhetorically signaled that they will resume attacks on**

**US assets in Iraq on or after January 1, 2022.** Iran’s proxy militias in Iraq have disingenuously labelled December 31, 2021, as the legal deadline for the departure of all US forces from Iraq. That date actually marks the formal transition of US forces’ role in Iraq to an exclusively advisory, training, and support role. The Iraqi Resistance Coordinating Committee—which represents Kata’ib Hezbollah, Harakat Hezbollah al-Nujaba, Asa’ib Ahl al-Haq, Kata’ib Sayyid al-Shuhada, Kata’ib al-Imam Ali, and possibly other Iranian proxy militias—claimed in a November 19 statement that US forces are increasing their presence in Iraq and promised to attack US forces immediately following the December 31 deadline.<sup>13</sup> Iranian proxy media channels distributed a combination of violent imagery, misleading legal arguments, and deceptive “resistance recruitment drives” to justify the planned resumption of attacks.<sup>14</sup> Various Iranian political proxies also argued that Iraqi Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi had no legal authority to allow US forces to remain after December 31, 2021.<sup>15</sup> Iran’s Iraqi proxies will likely resume rocket and drone attacks on US forces on or after January 1, 2022, to incentivize the complete withdrawal of all US forces from Iraq. The timing and scale of the resumption of attacks may shift depending on the tone and progress of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action negotiations between Iran and the United States in Vienna.

**3. Iran’s Iraqi proxies are conducting a disinformation campaign to cast doubt on the veracity of the November 7 Iranian proxy attempt to assassinate Iraqi Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi.** Iranian proxy groups issued statements in November questioning whether the attempted assassination took place and the veracity of the government investigation. Iranian proxy groups distributed falsified technical “evidence” to claim that the attack was a US and Israeli-coordinated false flag operation.<sup>16</sup> The Iraqi government announced on November 29 that their investigation would need more time to determine culpability despite Kadhimi’s November 8 statement that he knew who was responsible.<sup>17</sup> The government investigation did

determine that the attackers intended their first drone to strike Kadhimi’s roof to incentivize him to flee his home; the second drone hit the exit, suggesting that the attackers did intend to kill rather than merely intimidate Kadhimi.<sup>18</sup> The Iraqi government will most likely not name the groups responsible for the attack to limit conflict between the Iraqi Security Forces and the Iran-backed militias who were likely responsible. However, Iran’s Iraqi proxies have leveraged their comprehensive information operation to build plausible deniability in the Iraqi public sphere in the event of a formal government accusation. The proxy groups will likely continue to twist their assassination attempt narrative to argue for the ouster of US forces from Iraq and to justify future attacks on US and partnered assets.

**4. Iraq’s Independent High Electoral Commission (IHEC) finalized Iraq’s October 2021 election results despite Iranian proxy objections on November 30.** IHEC oversaw recounts in some disputed elections and changed the results of five parliamentary seats but did not substantively alter the balance of political power in Iraq’s next parliament.<sup>19</sup> Iran’s Iraqi proxies and other parliamentary blocs who lost influence following Iraq’s 2021 elections continued to decry the elections as fraudulent.<sup>20</sup> The IHEC will now send the results to Iraq’s Federal Supreme Court for ratification. The court has no mandated timeframe in which it must approve the results. The court will eventually send the results to the president, who will convene Parliament within 15 days to elect a new parliamentary speaker, traditionally a Sunni politician, who will then ask the largest political bloc to select a traditionally Shi’a prime minister-designate.

Shi’a political groups will negotiate to form a coalition government to select the next prime minister as they await, or attempt to prevent, the court’s approval of the election results. The winningest bloc, led by nationalist Shi’a cleric Moqtada al-Sadr, is attempting to box out Iran’s proxies and to form what Sadr calls a “national majority government” that omits some major

parties despite their electoral success. A Sadr-majority governing coalition poses a substantial threat to Iran's proxy influence in Iraq; Sadr has called for the disarmament of Iran-backed factions and the reinstatement of current Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi, whom Iran-backed groups attempted to assassinate on November 7.<sup>21</sup> Iran's Iraqi proxies may threaten members of other political blocs and the Federal Supreme Court to delay the court's approval of the election results and to deter other groups from joining a Sadrist bloc. Other possible trajectories include a compromise cabinet between Sadr and the other Shi'a blocs, an uptick in Iranian proxy violence against Sadrist and Kadhimi administration assets to push for new elections, or the formation of a Shi'a bloc to oppose a Sadr-majority coalition through regular parliamentary means.

**5. The Free Patriotic Movement (FPM) and Lebanese Hezbollah (LH)-aligned Loyalty to the Resistance Bloc (LRB) political parties are setting conditions to challenge the results of Lebanon's 2022 general election, likely to preserve the governing majority of their parliamentary alliance.** The FPM and LRB are likely aiming to postpone elections as long as possible to give themselves sufficient time to improve Lebanon's dire economic situation, which has injured their political popularity.<sup>22</sup> They may also be setting conditions to challenge the 2022 general elections if the results erode

their influence within the Lebanese government. Lebanon's parliament voted on October 19 to move the country's 2022 election date up from May 8 to March 27 to avoid political campaigns during the Muslim holy month of Ramadan.<sup>23</sup> FPM leader Gebran Bassil and Lebanese President and FPM member Michel Aoun denounced the date change and claimed that political rivals changed the election date to use Lebanon's current economic crisis against their ruling coalition.<sup>24</sup> Aoun returned the date change bill to Parliament on October 28 for a constitutionally-mandated "parliamentary review." Parliament immediately passed the bill again.<sup>25</sup> Aoun has stated he will not sign the bill, citing the current economic and political crises. The second passage means the date change will become law in 30 days with or without Aoun's approval. However, Bassil temporarily halted the process by filing an appeal to the Lebanese Constitutional Council on November 17. The council will decide on the appeal by December 17 and may reject it along party lines.<sup>26</sup> Bassil and LRB leader Mohammad Raad are framing the date change as an inappropriate and illegitimate break from constitutional norms.<sup>27</sup>

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