

Testimony of Ryan C. Crocker
Before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee
Hearing on Hezbollah
June 8, 2010

Mr. Chairman, Members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today to discuss Hezbollah, its strength, its supporters and the challenges it poses to vital US interests in the region. These are critical issues for our country, and the Committee is to be commended for raising them. While our focus today is on the Middle East, it is worth recalling that Hezbollah is a global network that also has capabilities in Asia, Africa, and Latin America.

For more than a quarter of a century, Hezbollah and its sponsors have targeted the US and its allies. I have been a witness to much of it. I was present in Lebanon when Hezbollah was created in the aftermath of the 1982 Israeli invasion. I was there during the bombings of the Embassy and the Marine Barracks the following year. I was back in Lebanon as ambassador when Hezbollah entered Parliament in the 1992 elections following the assassination of Abbas Musawi earlier that year. I was ambassador to Syria when a triumphant Hezbollah emerged ascendant in South Lebanon in 2000, and I was present when Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah led a delegation to Damascus to confer legitimacy on Bashar al-Asad in the wake of his father's death that same summer. And as ambassador to Iraq, I saw the evidence of Hezbollah's involvement in the training of Shia extremists under Iranian sponsorship.

Hezbollah is both an indigenous Lebanese organization and a proxy for Syria and Iran. It draws heavily for its legitimacy on deeply rooted themes of resistance and martyrdom in Shia Islam, what scholars such as Dr. Rola al-Hosseini call the Karbala Paradigm. This refers to the death of the Imam Hossein and his followers at the hands of an Ummayyad army near the Iraqi city of Karbala in Islam's first

century. For the Shia, it is the defining event in their history. In Hezbollah's contemporary narrative, we and Israel are cast in the role of the Umayyads- it is a compelling image for the lower class youth who are the core of Hezbollah's support.

For Iran and Syria, Hezbollah has been a valuable proxy. Iran has always seen itself as a regional power, capable of projecting power beyond its borders. The Shah did so with conventional forces. His army was deployed in the Arabian peninsula in the 1970s, and his navy seized three islands from the United Arab Emirates at the same time. The creation of Hezbollah in Lebanon, just three years after the revolution in Tehran, allowed the Islamic Republic to continue to project power in Iranian imperial tradition albeit by unconventional rather than conventional means.

For Syria, the establishment of an ideologically motivated terrorist organization provided an instrument whereby Damascus could continue its campaign in Lebanon against Israel and the US following the utter rout of its conventional forces at the hands of the Israelis in 1982. And for both Iran and Syria, it was another important element in a strategic partnership forged in the wake of Saddam Hussein's invasion of Iran in 1980 when Syria became the only Arab state to side with Tehran.

That strategic partnership is alive and well today. We saw it at work in Iraq during the period I was there, with Iran arming and training Shia militias in coordination with Hezbollah while Syria supported al-Qaida and Sunni insurgents. In essence, they were following the Lebanon game plan of the 1980s. It almost succeeded, but the surge and the determination of the Iraqis themselves confounded the effort, at least for the time being. And the partnership in Lebanon with Hezbollah continues. Weapons of increasing sophistication and lethality originate from Iran, and are delivered through Syria as they have been for two and a half decades.

But it would not be correct to see Hezbollah as a puppet manipulated through Tehran and Damascus. The organization is strongly rooted in Lebanon's own Shia Arab history. It is worth recalling that South Lebanon (known as Jabal 'Amal) flourished as a center of scholarship and culture in the Middle Ages. After the establishment of the Safavid Empire at the beginning of the 16th century, Iran's first Shia dynasty, the ulama of Jabal Amal advised the new rulers on the structure and principles of a Shia state. Hezbollah styles itself as the heir to that tradition.

Over the years, Hezbollah has expanded its capabilities and reach at every level-politically, socially and militarily. The 2006 conflict with Israel demonstrated that the threat posed by Hezbollah cannot be eliminated by military means. The recent improvement in Syrian-Saudi relations have strengthened the hand of Damascus in Lebanon, and strengthened Hezbollah as recent pressures on Prime Minister Hariri indicate. But neither Hezbollah nor its backers have a free hand, and there are opportunities as well as challenges. As we consider our options, I suggest we move in the following directions.

- Work to strengthen the Lebanese state, and especially the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF). The LAF has emerged from the turmoil of the civil war as an increasingly capable and professional force. I do not think it is realistic to expect the LAF to take on Hezbollah militarily, now or in the future. But a strong and engaged Lebanese army could over time change the thinking of Hezbollah's constituency. If the LAF is broadly seen by Lebanese Shia, including supporters of Hezbollah, as a competent and impartial force, the current strong support for an extra-legal militia may shift.
- A corollary is a concerted Lebanese government effort, with foreign assistance, to improve economic and social conditions in Shia areas. Shia mistrust of the state is rooted in generations of alienation fostered by a sense of economic marginalization and neglect. Much of Hezbollah's strength is the product of the state's weakness. Taken together, these two initiatives could bring about a recalculation by the Shia of the relative costs and

benefits of an ongoing state of military confrontation with Israel. At present, the benefits are perceived as far outweighing the costs.

- We should talk to Hezbollah. One thing I learned in Iraq is that engagement can be extremely valuable in ending an insurgency. Sometimes persuasion and negotiation change minds. But in any case we would learn far more about the organization than we know now- personalities, differences, points of weakness. We cannot mess with our adversary's mind if we are not talking to him. This does not need to be styled as a dramatic change in policy; simply a matter of fact engagement with those who hold official positions as members of parliament or the cabinet. Hezbollah is a part of the Lebanese political landscape, and we should deal with it directly.
- For the same reasons, we should step up our engagement with Syria. Sending an ambassador is not a concession. It improves our access, expands our understanding, allows us to identify potential weaknesses and differences including between Damascus and Tehran- in short it would be to our advantage, not theirs. I know Robert Ford well, and he is the ideal individual for a job I once held. He is fluent in Arabic, and with more than three years in Iraq since 2003, no stranger to tough assignments and tough people.

Mr. Chairman, these are not magic bullets. There are none in this campaign. But over time, such efforts can make a difference. Syria and Iran have demonstrated a capacity for strategic patience and a long game in Lebanon, transforming a weak hand to a strong one. It is important that we sustain long term commitments of our own.

Thank you.