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SOURCE FILE

# HAYKAL IN ISLAMABAD

A MILITARY VISIT, THE THEORIES IT SPAWNED, AND WHAT  
THE RECORD WILL BEAR

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**CORE GROUP**

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**Prepared By:** Core Group

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## KEY JUDGMENTS

### KJ-01 HIGH CONFIDENCE

**The visit is established fact and unremarkable in its mechanics.** Rodolphe Haykal traveled to Pakistan on 6 June at the standing invitation of Field Marshal Asim Munir, met him at General Headquarters in Rawalpindi on 9 June after a guard of honour, and closed with talks and a cooperation pledge but no memorandum, agreement, or joint statement. Lebanese officials describe the trip as planned more than a month in advance along an army-to-army tie that is decades old. The hard record is a visit and a pledge, and everything beyond it is inference.

### KJ-02 HIGH CONFIDENCE

**The trip is a hedge along an old channel, not a realignment.** The United States is the Lebanese Army's principal patron, with more than three billion dollars in assistance since 2006 and more than six thousand personnel trained since 1970, and the Pakistan tie sits beside that dependency rather than in place of it. Reaching toward a non-Western military power widens the army's institutional base at low cost without loosening the structure that funds and equips it.

### KJ-03 MEDIUM CONFIDENCE

**Of the theories the visit spawned, the coupling reading carries the most weight, and its load-bearing claim is unconfirmed.** That Lebanon's fate is bound to the United States-Iran endgame brokered through Islamabad is grounded, because Tehran has tied any deal to Lebanon and Munir runs that channel. That Pakistan actively brokers Lebanon's southern arrangements, with a written Lebanon text taking shape in Islamabad, rests on a Shia-duo account that no party with leverage has confirmed and that the army commander, rather than a political negotiator, is an unlikely instrument to carry. Confidence is medium on the structural coupling and low on the active-brokerage claim.

### KJ-04 LOW CONFIDENCE

**Three further readings circulate, and none can be confirmed from the record.** A Pakistan-United States capacity track for the army, a duo-run Islamabad road-map parallel to the Gulf, and the killing of army officers as Haykal departed read as an Israeli message against the channel each fit the moment and each lack a confirming fact. They are examined here rather than dismissed, because the figures advancing them sit close to the negotiation.

**KJ-05** **HIGH CONFIDENCE**

**None of the readings changes the structure governing the south.** Whether the war stops depends on Israel halting across Lebanese territory and on Washington compelling it, and a Pakistani channel touches neither. Israel struck the army during the visit, holds ground inside Lebanon, and operates under United States cover, a constraint visible in the order of battle that the diplomacy has not moved. Pakistan is at most an auxiliary actor on a file decided elsewhere.

**KJ-06** **MEDIUM CONFIDENCE**

**Whichever theory is true, their circulation is itself an assessable signal.** All four rest on a shared and observable premise, that the Washington direct track is failing to stop the war, and they split along Lebanon's internal fault line, with the Shia duo amplifying the alternative-channel readings and the presidency denying them. The contest over what the visit meant is a proxy for the contest over who controls Lebanon's negotiating posture, and that contest is real even where the individual readings are not.

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## I. THE VISIT ON THE RECORD

Haykal left Beirut for Pakistan on Saturday 6 June 2026 at the invitation of Field Marshal Asim Munir, Chief of Army Staff and Pakistan's first Chief of Defence Forces. The Lebanese Army announced the departure in its own statement, naming Munir as the host and framing the trip as a bilateral military engagement. He met Munir at General Headquarters in Rawalpindi on 9 June, received a guard of honour from a tri-services contingent, and held talks before departing. No Lebanese official readout of the meeting itself has surfaced from the presidency, the army command, or the government.

The Pakistani account, issued by the military's media wing, is the fullest record of the substance. The two commanders exchanged views on regional security, defence cooperation, and prospects for enhancing bilateral military relations, with the discussion focused on professional interactions, training cooperation, and institutional linkages. Munir stated his army's commitment to expanding defence collaboration with the Lebanese Army, and Haykal acknowledged the professionalism of the Pakistani armed forces and their contributions to regional peacekeeping. No memorandum, signed agreement, or joint statement was announced by either side. The engagement produced a pledge to deepen cooperation and nothing on paper.

Haykal departed under fire. An Israeli strike on the Khardali-Nabatieh road killed Brigadier General Wissam Sabra and two servicemen as he left for Pakistan. The army called the strike aggressive and barbaric and said it aimed to wreck efforts to reach a settlement, President Joseph Aoun called it a flagrant violation of Lebanese sovereignty, Speaker Nabih Berri said

the killing was no error or ambiguity, Saudi Arabia condemned the attack on Lebanon's army, and the Israeli military acknowledged the strike and said it had opened an inquiry. The coincidence of the killing with the departure drew an immediate political reading in Beirut.

The two principals give the meeting weight that lifts it above protocol. Munir is the most powerful figure in Pakistan's security establishment, promoted to field marshal in May 2025 and given a unified command over the armed forces in December, and he is Islamabad's lead interlocutor in the United States-Iran talks, having run a Tehran shuttle through subordinate envoys in the weeks before the visit. Haykal commanded the army's sector south of the Litani during the war with Israel, the zone that absorbed the heaviest strikes, before taking command of the army in March 2025, succeeding Joseph Aoun on the latter's election to the presidency. He is the officer Lebanon has placed at the center of the southern deployment that any ceasefire would require, and the counterpart Pakistan chose to host is its single most consequential commander.

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## II. THE RELATIONSHIP

The Lebanon-Pakistan military tie is decades old and concrete. Lebanon sold its grounded fleet of roughly nine Mirage III fighters to Pakistan around 2000, aircraft the Pakistan Aeronautical Complex refurbished and folded into its own Mirage force, and the two armies have maintained exchanges and training contacts since. Lebanese officers attend courses in Pakistan on a recurring basis, and Pakistani arms transfers to the army form part of the official account of the relationship. The invitation Haykal accepted runs along an established channel, not a new one opened for the occasion.

That channel sits beside, not in place of, Lebanon's principal security partnership. The United States is the Lebanese Army's main backer, having provided more than three billion dollars in assistance since 2006 for hardware, ammunition, and sustainment, and having trained more than six thousand Lebanese personnel since 1970. The army's equipment, its officer pipeline, and its institutional survival run through Washington. A high-profile visit to a non-Western military power therefore reads less as a realignment than as a hedge, a widening of the institutional base at a moment when the army is under strain and its Western patron is pressing it toward a southern mission it has reasons to resist.

What Pakistan can supply is specific and relevant to that mission. Its army carries deep experience in counterterrorism, border control, and irregular operations accumulated across two decades of internal campaigns, the precise competencies the Lebanese Army needs as it is asked to assert exclusive control over a southern zone still contested by Hezbollah and Israel. Training pipelines, doctrine exchange, and logistical or technical support are the plausible content of any deepened cooperation. None of these were named in the public record of the visit, which is why the military payload remains a capability the relationship could develop rather than a program the meeting announced.

## A. Historical Considerations

Pakistan holds the world's second-largest Shia population after Iran, and Shia figures sat close to the center of the state's creation. Muhammad Ali Jinnah, the founder, came from a Shia background, and Shia leaders filled a disproportionate share of the early elite, including prime ministers, military rulers, and the Bhutto family that governed into the 1990s. That demographic and historical weight feeds an assumption, current in Lebanese discussion, that Pakistan carries a sectarian sympathy toward the Iran-aligned axis, which would make Islamabad a natural and willing channel for Hezbollah and Tehran. The state's conduct does not bear the assumption out. Since General Zia-ul-Haq's Islamization drive after 1977, experienced by many Shia as a Sunnification of public life, the official religious character has tilted Sunni-orthodox, the state has tolerated and at times patronized Sunni sectarian networks, and the country has absorbed recurring anti-Shia violence. Its foreign policy runs on dependence on Saudi and Gulf financing and on a balancing that avoids open confrontation with Iran chiefly to protect domestic sectarian stability rather than from affinity, the posture that kept Pakistan out of the Saudi-led intervention in Yemen in 2015. The Shia presence is a fact of Pakistani society, not a lever of its statecraft, and what gives Islamabad any use on the Lebanon file is its ability to hold lines to Riyadh, Tehran, and Washington at once, a balancing position rather than the sectarian alignment the assumption supposes.

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## III. FOUR READINGS OF THE VISIT

The thin official record left room, and Beirut filled it within hours with four distinct theories of what the trip meant. Each is unverified, and each is advanced by actors with a stake in the answer.

### A. The coupling reading: Lebanon on the Islamabad table

The strongest version holds that Lebanon's southern file has entered the substance of the United States-Iran negotiation, and that the negotiation runs through Islamabad. On this account the papers exchanged between Tehran and Washington no longer cover only a Lebanese ceasefire but have begun to address Israeli withdrawal and the situation south of the Litani, the Lebanon file sits on Pakistan's mediation agenda at Iran's request and with United States awareness, and Haykal traveled to brief the broker on the southern reality and the army's role in any settlement. In the maximalist form, a written Lebanon text is being drafted in Islamabad while the Washington table runs as theater.

The reading rests on three assumptions of descending solidity. The first, that the United States-Iran channel runs through Munir, is well-supported. The second, that Lebanon's specific arrangements have entered that channel's text, is plausible given that Tehran has insisted Lebanon be part of any deal, but it is asserted rather than shown. The third, that Pakistan has been handed the Lebanon sub-file to broker, is the weakest link and the one the

whole reading needs. If the third assumption held, the visit would be a working session of the mediation, and the natural instrument would be a political envoy carrying the state's negotiating authority rather than the army commander.

The evidence cuts both ways. In favor, Lebanon is structurally inside the war's endgame, Munnir's shuttle is real, the timing is exact, and the actors closest to the claim are not idle commentators but figures in the Shia duo who sit near the negotiation. Against, the meeting produced no agreement, the official Lebanese account denies any negotiation link and any Iranian contact, and no party with leverage on the southern front, not Israel, not Iran, not Washington, has acknowledged a Pakistani role on Lebanon. The two strongest counter-facts are the no-text outcome and the silence of the parties who would have to consent to a Pakistani channel for it to function.

If the reading holds, the implication is that Lebanon's south is being decided above Beirut's head in a venue Beirut does not control, that the direct Washington track is a holding pattern, and that the duo's insistence on a comprehensive ceasefire before any deployment is backed by an Iranian card played through Islamabad. The reading is advanced by the Shia duo, and the interest is legible. It moves the negotiation's center of gravity away from the Washington table, where the formula trading a halt on the southern suburbs for continued Israeli operations in the south runs against the duo, toward a venue where Iran's weight applies. The claim is also a claim of relevance, asserting that the bloc sits astride the channel that matters.

## **B. The army-support reading: a Pakistan-United States capacity track**

A second theory treats the visit as a step in a military-support track for the Lebanese Army coordinated between Islamabad and Washington, the content being capacity-building, training, doctrine, and possibly equipment, aimed at readying the army for the exclusive control of southern ground that the ceasefire arrangements assign it. The reading bridges the routine-military and geopolitical frames, keeping the substance inside the army-to-army lane while giving it a strategic purpose tied to the settlement. Its assumptions are modest, which is its strength. It requires only that Pakistan supply competencies the army needs and that the United States, the army's principal patron, be aware of or behind a third-party contribution to its own client, and both are easy to credit given Pakistan's counterterrorism record and the alliance structure.

What the reading lacks is any announced program. No training cohort, equipment line, or trilateral arrangement was named, and the United States equips the army directly without requiring Islamabad as an intermediary, which removes the obvious necessity for a conduit. If the reading holds, it is the least dramatic and the most consequential of the four, because quiet institution-building that strengthens the army for the south is exactly what the ceasefire needs and exactly what Hezbollah would oppose, and it would proceed without the visibility that the other readings assume. It is advanced by accounts sympathetic to the army-as-stabilizer frame, for which a constructive capacity track is the natural interpretation.

### C. The duo-channel reading: an Islamabad road-map

A third theory places the visit inside the Amal-Hezbollah bloc's own diplomacy. The bloc that sent its envoy to Doha is described as working an Islamabad road-map in parallel with the Gulf, with positive signals from Islamabad reaching Hezbollah, and the visit becomes one node in a multi-venue effort to secure a comprehensive ceasefire and Israeli withdrawal on the duo's terms. The reading draws on a real pattern, since the bloc has demonstrably run parallel channels through Doha and Riyadh and has moved in step with Iranian assent.

The reading strains against its instrument. The army commander is an awkward vehicle for a party channel, using him as one would compromise the institution's posture as a state actor following the president's decision, and the official Lebanese account meets the reading head-on by denying that Berri arranged the visit and insisting the army negotiates nothing on the bloc's behalf. If true, the line between the army and the bloc has blurred at the top, which would strain Lebanon's civil-military arrangement and hand Israel a ready pretext to treat the army as a Hezbollah adjunct and a legitimate target. The reading is advanced from two opposite directions, which is its tell. The duo has an interest in suggesting that the state's military apparatus moves with its road-map, and the bloc's adversaries have a symmetric interest in tying the army to Hezbollah to delegitimize it, and the same claim serves both.

### D. The strike reading: a message in the timing

The fourth theory is about the visit's shadow rather than its content. It holds that Israel timed the Khardali-Nabatieh strike to signal against the Islamabad channel and the army's role, a message meant to foreclose alternative tracks, and its strongest form notes that the strike followed the visit's announcement by a day, that Israel has an interest in keeping the Lebanon file inside its own bilateral track, and that the Lebanese military delegation had just refused joint security arrangements with Israel in the south at the Washington table.

The reading assumes that Israel knew of and weighted the visit enough to time a strike to it, and that the strike's purpose was signaling rather than the routine pressure Israel applies to the army across the south, and neither assumption is shown. Israel strikes the army repeatedly, the killing fits that established pattern without a specific link to the trip, and no Israeli statement ties the two. If the reading held, the implication would be that Israel is actively policing Lebanon's external channels and treats the army's diversification as a threat to be punished, which would mean the south stays hot regardless of which venue Beirut tries. The reading is advanced by Jamil Sayyed and the resistance axis, and the interest is to bind the army's fate to the resistance narrative, casting the institution as a shared victim of the same Israeli aggression and pressing the state to abandon the separate-tracks posture the presidency has defended. The strike is real and the deaths are real. The message read into them is an inference carried by the actors it serves.

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#### IV. WHY THE READINGS DIVERGE

One premise sits under all four readings, and it is the part of the picture not in dispute. The Washington direct track is failing to stop the war. Israel struck the army days after a Washington round, has refused to commit to a comprehensive halt, and continues to hold ground inside Lebanese territory, while the declaration of principles meant to anchor the next phase was rejected by Hezbollah and dismissed by Berri as a hybrid text with booby-trapped clauses, and the proposed deployment of the army into southern pilot zones drew open comparison in Beirut to arrangements that had failed before. Across the political divide, the conclusion that the Washington table is not delivering is shared. The readings are competing answers to the question that follows, which is what Lebanon does about it.

The answers split along the internal fault line. The Shia duo amplifies the readings that move the negotiation toward Islamabad and the alternative channels, because the Washington formula disadvantages it and a venue where Iran carries weight improves its position. The presidency denies those readings, because President Joseph Aoun has staked his posture on keeping Lebanon's file in Washington and on decoupling Lebanon from the United States-Iran track, a posture he pressed to the point of accusing Tehran of treating Lebanon as a bargaining chip and drawing a sarcastic reply from Iranian Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi that a country used as Iran's chip would have reached a deal long ago. The visit became a screen onto which each camp projected its preferred account of where Lebanon's settlement is being decided.

The payload survives the uncertainty. The individual readings cannot be confirmed from the open record, but the contest among them is itself evidence, and it is assessable. It establishes that Lebanon's elite has lost confidence in the Washington track, that it is actively searching for alternative channels, and that the search is contested between a bloc seeking to route the file through Iran's reach and a presidency seeking to keep it in Washington's. The visit did not resolve that contest. It exposed it.

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#### V. STRATEGIC SIGNIFICANCE

For Lebanon, the visit is an attempt to widen a narrowing field. With the Washington track stalled and the southern front active, reaching toward a non-Western military power that holds lines to the Gulf and to Tehran lets Beirut diversify its contacts at low cost and without committing to anything, and it signals to Washington that Lebanon will cultivate other relationships when the principal one delivers pressure faster than relief. It does not loosen the dependency that governs the army's budget and equipment, and it does not open an exit from the triangle that decides the south.

For the army, the engagement is institution-building under acute strain. The army is being asked to deploy into a contested south, to assert exclusive control where Hezbollah retains

weapons and Israel retains the initiative, and to do so while absorbing strikes on its own personnel. Pakistan's counterterrorism, border, and irregular-warfare experience maps onto that mission more directly than the conventional support Western patrons supply, which gives a cooperation deepening a logic beyond symbolism even where no program has yet been named.

For Pakistan, hosting Haykal extends Munir's projection of Islamabad as an indispensable balancer. Having inserted itself into the United States-Iran file, Pakistan gains by being seen to touch the Levant security question as well, accumulating the standing of a power whose channels reach into every regional crisis. The cost is low and the visibility is high, which is the profile of a status play more than a commitment. The diplomacy around Lebanon is widening to new mediators and venues, while the constraint that decides the outcome, Israeli conduct on the ground under United States cover, has not moved.

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## VI. ASSESSMENT

### Assessment 1

**MEDIUM CONFIDENCE**

The coupling reading is sound on structure and unconfirmed on substance. Lebanon is bound to the United States-Iran endgame, Tehran has insisted Lebanon travel with any deal, and Munir runs the channel, which makes the coupling of the files real. The further claim that Pakistan actively brokers Lebanon's southern arrangements, with a text taking shape in Islamabad, rests on a Shia-duo account that no party with leverage has confirmed and that the choice of the army commander as envoy, rather than a political negotiator, argues against. An alternative explanation, that the coupling is structural while the active-brokerage claim is the duo asserting relevance, fits the no-text outcome and the silence of Israel, Iran, and Washington better than the maximalist version. Confidence is medium because the structural coupling is well-grounded even though the brokerage claim is not.

### Assessment 2

**LOW CONFIDENCE**

The two channel readings, a Pakistan-United States capacity track for the army and a duo-run Islamabad road-map, are each plausible and each unproven. The capacity track fits the army's need for counterterrorism and border depth and the alliance structure, but no program was announced and Washington equips the army directly without a conduit. The duo road-map fits the bloc's documented multi-venue diplomacy, but the army commander is an implausible vehicle for a party channel and the state explicitly denies a role for Berri. An alternative explanation, that both readings project a design onto what is an ordinary army-to-army visit, is at least as consistent with the record as either. Confidence is low because both rest on inference about interests rather than on any disclosed arrangement.

**Assessment 3****LOW CONFIDENCE**

The strike-as-message reading is an inference whose value is diagnostic, not evidentiary. The timing is real and Israel has reason to keep the Lebanon file in its own track, but Israel strikes the army routinely, the killing of Brigadier General Sabra fits that standing campaign, and no Israeli statement links it to the visit. An alternative explanation, that the strike is one more instance of continuous pressure on the army in the south, requires no special occasion and fits the established record. Confidence is low as a statement about Israeli intent, and the reading matters mainly as a measure of how the resistance axis is binding the army's external moves to its own narrative.

**Assessment 4****HIGH CONFIDENCE**

The visit does not alter the trajectory of the southern file, because the binding constraint is Israeli intent under United States cover, not the number of channels. Israel struck the army during the visit, continues to hold ground inside Lebanese territory, and reserves the right to resume, while Washington underwrites its security demands and presses Hezbollah's disarmament, and a Pakistani cooperation pledge touches none of these levers. An alternative explanation, that a new external channel shifts the United States calculus enough to force Israeli concessions, is less consistent with Israel's conduct during the visit itself, when it struck the army it was ostensibly being courted to spare. Confidence is high because the constraint is visible in the order of battle, which the diplomacy has not changed.

**Assessment 5****MEDIUM CONFIDENCE**

The routine-visit account is the most likely explanation of the trip, and the readings it spawned are the more durable intelligence. A long-planned engagement along a decades-old channel, closing without an agreement, is the most economical account of what Haykal did in Rawalpindi, and it says nothing about why four competing theories attached to it within hours, which the strategic context does explain. The readings took hold because the Washington track is visibly failing and Lebanon's camps are contesting where the file should move next, the duo amplifying the channels that route through Iran's reach and the presidency holding to Washington. An alternative explanation, that the readings are noise from a slow cycle, is inconsistent with the seniority of the actors advancing them and the precision of the claims. Confidence is medium because the contest the readings express is observable in the political record even though the readings themselves are not.

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## VII. INDICATORS TO MONITOR

- A written Lebanon text, memorandum, or joint statement tied to the Islamabad channel surfaces in either capital, the single observable that would move the coupling reading from assertion toward fact.
- A Lebanese political figure carrying the state's negotiating authority, rather than the army commander, joins the Islamabad track, distinguishing active brokerage from a military visit.
- Israel, Iran, or the United States acknowledges a Pakistani role on the Lebanon file, supplying the party consent the coupling reading currently lacks.
- A Pakistan-Lebanon training, equipment, or doctrine program is announced, or a United States-coordinated trilateral arrangement is named, confirming the capacity-track reading.
- A Shia-duo figure or a Hezbollah envoy surfaces in connection with an Islamabad contact, or Berri is tied to the channel, testing the duo-channel reading against the official denial.
- An Israeli statement links strikes on the army to Lebanon's external contacts, or a pattern of strikes timed to Lebanese diplomatic moves emerges, which would lift the strike reading above inference.
- A Lebanese official readout of the 9 June meeting is issued by the presidency, the army command, or the government, fixing the visit's content and narrowing the space the readings occupy.
- The United States-Iran track in Islamabad produces a signed instrument or publicly breaks down, the gating variable that bounds every reading that depends on it.



## CORE GROUP

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### ABOUT CORE GROUP

Core Group is a Beirut-based strategic foresight house. We produce decision-ready analysis and advisory for governments, diplomatic institutions, and strategic investors navigating Middle Eastern complexity. Our work integrates structured analytical products, applied strategic advisory, and analysis-informed mediation; delivered on daily and weekly cycles calibrated to the speed at which the situation changes.

We are based in Beirut. In environments where official data is systematically unreliable and remote analysis inherits every distortion in its source material, physical proximity is not a logistical convenience but an epistemological foundation of our methodology. We verify what others can only estimate.