

Dirasat

Hezbollah's Military Involvement in Syria and its Wider Regional Role

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Abstract

The fall of Aleppo in December emphasized the prominent role played by Lebanese Hezbollah in the Syrian war. Since 2013, Hezbollah fighters have operated across the border alongside the Syrian army and forces loyal to the regime of President Bashar Assad. Hezbollah's importance is twofold: first, it has enabled the regime to wrestle back areas from rebel control, and second, it has significantly increased the effectiveness of pro-regime forces.

The war in Syria, which was triggered by the March 2011 peaceful protests against the regime of President Assad, was perceived as a dangerous threat by Hezbollah and its backer Iran, as it endangered the strategic alliance that Hezbollah had with Assad. Syria is, after all, an important part in the supply chain linking Iran to Hezbollah. Syria's fall into the hands of a Sunni majority, which would make the nation less inclined to work with Iran, would also deprive Iran of its foothold (through Lebanon) on the Mediterranean and its access on the Arab-Israeli front line.

These reasons can explain Hezbollah's current sizable involvement in Syria. Anti-Hezbollah activist Lokman Slim believes the organization has deployed from 7,000 to 9,000 fighters and lost over 2,500 militants there. Hezbollah has deployed several divisions in Syria offering military capabilities that the Assad regime lacked. These include guerilla-style combat, light infantry, reconnaissance, and sniper fire. Hezbollah has also provided training to various groups, with one commander interviewed by this author boasting his organization had trained some 120,000 fighters, a figure that the author could not confirm.

The beginning of 2012 witnessed only limited activity by Hezbollah, which was believed to have sent experts to help crack down on the revolution and protect strategic Lebanese border areas as well as Shiite shrines located around Damascus. Yet in 2013, Hezbollah's role in Syria expanded significantly, with Lebanese militants taking a direct combat role and operating openly in larger numbers in the launch of the ground assault on Qusayr, a Sunni town in the

Homs province close to the Lebanon border. After the victory at Qusayr, which can be labeled a turning point in Hezbollah's involvement in Syria, the organization acted in support of the regime elsewhere in Syria, in Homs, Damascus, and Aleppo. Around Damascus, the capture of Zabadani in 2016 can be considered another inflection point in Hezbollah's military role across the border, one that helped in securing the regime's seat in the capital. The fall of Aleppo in 2016 to pro-regime forces, which were assisted by various militias, including Hezbollah, finally consecrated the organization's offensive capabilities.

These various battles underline Hezbollah's three-pronged role in Syria: Hezbollah's advisory role in battle; its direct embedding with the Syrian army, which had been stretched thin by years of fighting, in the form of a light infantry force; and finally, the organization's training capabilities involving paramilitary forces.

While the war in Syria has definitely neutralized the Israeli battle front in Lebanon, Hezbollah has also gained from the war. The militant group has witnessed an evolution in its mode of operations, moving from an organization that operated mostly as a guerilla force to nearly as a conventional army. It has turned into an effective fighting force for Iran, capable of waging hybrid warfare in other war theaters besides Syria.

These gains have not yet been outweighed by the organization's increased weaknesses: significant but manageable losses within the organization's fighting ranks, the loss of a number of top commanders in Syria, increased financial pressure on the organization at a time when funding appears to be in decline, and possible divisions within its ranks concerning its future role in Syria.

Introduction

In 2010, Hezbollah welcomed the Arab revolutions. Sayed Hassan Nasrallah, the secretary general of the party, congratulated the Tunisians on their revolution, and on another occasion commented on the “tyrants” who had been removed from Egypt and Tunisia.¹ Yet in Syria, the Lebanese militant group dubbed the revolution a conspiracy. Syria was, according to Nasrallah, “the backbone of the resistance, [and he assured his followers] that he will not let this bone break.”² Hezbollah made its involvement across the border official starting in 2013, with its fighters operating openly and in greater numbers alongside their Syrian and Iraqi counterparts to turn back regime losses and regain the control of strategic areas taken over by the opposition.

This article details Hezbollah’s involvement in Syria from the beginning of the conflict till the present day. The first section provides a background on Hezbollah, and the second section highlights the relation of the militant group with Syria within the Axis of Resistance. The third section of the article details the escalation of Hezbollah’s presence in 2013 and examines the group’s role in operations across Syria from the beginning of 2013 onward, from Qussayr and Qalamoun to Damascus and Aleppo, and then to southern Syria. It then explores the structure of Hezbollah in Syria and the nature of its deployment by looking into the paramilitary factions that Hezbollah helped create and train. The last section concludes the analysis by looking at the organization’s strengths and weaknesses resulting from its involvement in Syria. Finally, the study encompasses interviews with Hezbollah fighters (one commander and one trainer), Hezbollah experts, anti-Hezbollah activists, and pro-Hezbollah analysts speaking on condition of anonymity, as well as military experts. The author also requested an official interview with Hezbollah to no avail.

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- (1) Qifa Nabki, “Nasrallah on Syria: More Equal Than Others?” May 26, 2011, <https://qifanabki.com/2011/05/26/some-arab-revolutions-are-more-equal-than-others/>.
 - (2) Naharnet Newsdesk, “Mustaqbal Says Hizbullah ‘Topped Disassociation Policy,’ Warns of Attempt to Cause Strife between Army, Arsal Residents,” May 28, 2013, <http://www.naharnet.com/stories/en/84793>.

Hezbollah from a Resistance Movement to a Terrorist Organization

Originally comprised of a southern Lebanese group focusing on fighting the Israeli invasion that lasted from 1982 to 2000, Hezbollah has developed into a powerful paramilitary force which activity has extended across the region. Iranian sponsorship has played a critical role in the creation of Hezbollah since 1982. At the time, the Cairo Agreement of 1969 sanctioned Palestinian militancy against Israel on the country's southern front. One Shiite group, Amal, which was founded by Sayed Musa Sadr, was on the front line in the war against Israel until 1982. That year the organization was split after its new leader (now Speaker of the House), Nabih Berri, decided not to fight in response to Israel's advance on Lebanon. This decision was contested by the party's Islamic branch, which defected as a result. This group merged with other Shiite militants, including the Iraqi Daawa Party, and was trained by Iranian Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRCG) forces, which had been sent by Iran to stop the expansion of the Israel Defense Forces (IDF). A common politicomilitary command structure was then forged, followed later by "The Manifesto of the Nine," and which became known as Hezbollah's founding act. It called for jihad against Israel, emphasized Islam as the movement's doctrine, and declared the signatories' adherence to the Iranian Wilayat al-faqih. However, in the 1980s, Hezbollah's activity was not limited to fighting Israel; in 1983, a Hezbollah suicide attacker charged into the headquarters of the U.S. marine corps, killing 241 people.³ Hezbollah is also believed to have been behind the suicide truck bombings of the U.S. Embassy in Beirut in April 1983⁴ and the U.S. embassy annex in Beirut in September 1984,⁵ as well as the

(3) CNN Library, "Beirut Marine Barracks Bombing Fast Facts," updated November 2, 2016, <http://edition.cnn.com/2013/06/13/world/meast/beirut-marine-barracks-bombing-fast-facts/>.

(4) Central Intelligence Agency, "Flashback: April 18, 1983: U.S. Embassy Attacked in Beirut," updated July 10, 2014, <https://www.cia.gov/news-information/featured-story-archive/2014-featured-story-archive/flashback-april-18-1983-u-s-embassy-bombed-in-beirut.html>.

(5) Nora Boystany, "Bomb Kills 23 at U.S. Embassy in Lebanon," September 21, 1984, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1984/09/21/bomb-kills-23-at-us-embassy-in-lebanon/a56a0e19-a188-46ee-af9b-6632f688e780/>.

hijacking of TWA flight 847 in 1985⁶ and the Khobar Towers⁷ attack in Saudi Arabia in 1996.

The group's military arm is only one aspect of Hezbollah's activity. The organization consolidated its power by entering the Lebanese political system in 1992, with the election of some of its members to the first postwar Lebanese parliament. This political role allowed Hezbollah to strengthen its power base and to overcome the challenges posed by the end of the Israeli occupation of Lebanon and of UN Resolution 1559, which called for dismantling all militias in Lebanon. In 2000, the growing number of deaths and injuries among the Israeli military in Lebanon had created strong opposition to Israeli occupation of that country, which led to its swift withdrawal from South Lebanon in May. Israel's unilateral decision deprived Syria and Iran of a strategic access to the Arab-Israeli conflict, which forced them to engineer a new territorial dispute in the form of the contested Shebaa Farms,⁸ which were considered Syrian by the United Nations. In 2004, Hezbollah was able to confront the passage of UN Security Council Resolution 1559, which called for the disarmament of all armed militias in Lebanon, by casting itself as the defender of Lebanon against Israeli aggression and as the main representative of the Shiite community. In 2005, after the assassination of prime minister Rafic Hariri, initially attributed to Syria and that resulted in the end of the Damascus-led occupation, Hezbollah once again pursued its Lebanonization policy by entering the government, in order to increase its control over the political process following the loss of its Syrian backer. In May 2008⁹, Hezbollah militants seized parts of Beirut in response to calls by the government to restrict the group's secure communications, and the firing of

(6) STRATFOR, "Lebanon: Hezbollah's Kidnapping Plan," January 22, 2008, <https://www.stratfor.com/analysis/lebanon-hezbollahs-kidnapping-plan>.

(7) Erica Pearson, "Khobar Towers Bombing of 1996," updated December 13, 2015, <https://www.britannica.com/event/Khobar-Towers-bombing-of-1996>.

(8) Reut Institute, "The Shebaa Farms," August 6, 2006, <http://reut-institute.org/en/Publication.aspx?PublicationId=676>.

(9) Robert F. Worth and Nada Bakri, "Hezbollah Seizes Swath of Beirut from U.S.-Backed Lebanon Government," May 10, 2008, <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/05/10/world/middleeast/10lebanon.html>.

the head of the airport security who was a close ally to the group. The ensuing crisis resulted with the 2008 *Doha Agreement*, which allocated the group with veto power in the government. In July 2011¹⁰ the UN Special Tribunal for Lebanon (STL) indicted five Hezbollah members—including a senior Hezbollah official—for the assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq al-Hariri, who was killed by a car-bomb in Beirut on 14 February 2005. Hezbollah leader Hasan Nasrallah had publicly stated that his organization would not allow any member to be arrested. In 2013, the European Union placed the armed wing of Hezbollah on its terrorism blacklist, a move driven by concerns over the Lebanese militant group's involvement in a deadly bus bombing in the Syrian war, as well as the role played by its militants in a deadly bombing in Bulgaria, which took place in 2012 and was denied by Hezbollah.¹¹ Nearly three years later, in March 2016, the Arab League branded the Lebanese Shia Muslim movement Hezbollah a terrorist organization; this occurred a week after a similar move was made by the Arab Gulf states.¹²

Hezbollah, Syria, and the Axis of Resistance

The Axis of Resistance is the antiwestern, anti-Israeli alliance led by Iran, which includes Syria and Hezbollah. New unofficial additions include the Iraqi Hashd Shaabi (Popular Mobilization Forces, or PMF) and the Yemeni Houthis, two nonstate actors.

In 2011, Syrian protests presented a threat to the axis in a number of ways. First, “Syria has been the main supply line of Iranian military and logistic assistance to Hezbollah,” according Lebanese analyst Kassem Kassir.¹³ Second, Syria

(10) Ronen Bergman, “The Hezbollah Connection,” February 10, 2015, https://www.nytimes.com/2015/02/15/magazine/the-hezbollah-connection.html?_r=0.

(11) Reuters, “EU Adds Hezbollah’s Military Wing to Terrorism List,” July 22, 2013, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-eu-hezbollah-idUSBRE96K0DA20130722>.

(12) BBC News, “Arab League Brands Hezbollah a Terrorist Organization,” March 11, 2016, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-35789303>.

(13) Interview with Kassem Kassir, February 2017.

is an essential element giving Arab legitimacy to Iran's ideological Axis of Resistance construct. And third, the loss of Syria would result in a possible decline of Iran's leverage on Lebanon and thus its access to the Arab-Israeli conflict and Iran's foothold in the Mediterranean. For Syria, Iran has been an essential backer since the onset of the Syria protests. According to a Bloomberg article¹⁴ quoting a UN source, Iran has spent an average of \$6 billion annually to shore up the Assad regime. Also according to Bloomberg, some experts believe this aid to have reached \$14 billion in 2014. Iran's budget for Hezbollah is estimated to have been \$200 million prior to the Syria war.¹⁵

Syria-Hezbollah Relations from 1982 to 1990: Converging Interests Marked by Rivalry

President Hafez Assad, the father of current president Bashar Assad, had mixed feelings toward Hezbollah when the organization emerged in 1982. Assad, who had a secular Baathist background, viewed the jihadist organization with suspicion, while he favored Hezbollah's parent organization, Amal; the two groups were competing for hegemony over the Shiite community at the time. While Amal was essentially supported by Syria, it was the Iranians, and more specifically the Iranian Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), which was funding and training Hezbollah. "By 1987 Syria's direct intervention in Lebanon and its fear of Iran's growing power in Lebanon led to direct armed clashes between Hezbollah and Syrian troops," according to the website of the Stanford University Mapping Militants Project.¹⁶ Yet, in the 1990s, Syria and Hezbollah's relations evolved as the organization proved itself as an efficient and pragmatic and successful movement in the war against Israel,"

(14) Eli Lake, "Iran Spends Billions to Prop Up Assad," June 9, 2015, <https://www.bloomberg.com/view/articles/2015-06-09/iran-spends-billions-to-prop-up-assad>.

(15) Maji Rafizadeh, "In First, Hezbollah Confirms All Financial Support Comes from Iran," June 25, 2016, <https://english.alarabiya.net/en/2016/06/25/In-first-Hezbollah-s-Nasrallah-confirms-all-financial-support-comes-from-Iran.html>.

(16) Mapping Militant Organizations, "Hezbollah," updated August 5, 2016, <http://web.stanford.edu/group/mappingmilitants/cgi-bin/groups/view/81?highlight=hezbollah>.

explained a researcher affiliated with the organization, who spoke on condition of anonymity.¹⁷ “Assad also saw that the Israeli peace process was not going far, and that Hezbollah had become a necessary ally,” the researcher added.

From 2000 to 2011: Hezbollah and Syria's Honeymoon Period

The year 2000 witnessed significant geostrategic and political changes in both Syria and Lebanon. In April 2000, increased casualties incurred by the Israeli army in Lebanon, which were denounced by the Israeli population, triggered a swift retreat of Israel from South Lebanon. The end of the occupation left Iran and Syria with a conundrum: how to justify the continuation of the war on Israel following the retreat of the IDF. A few months later, in June, President Hafez Assad died following a long sickness. He was quickly succeeded by his son Bashar. “Bashar Assad did not have the political legitimacy his father enjoyed; he thus needed to capitalize on Hezbollah’s victories against Israel,” explains Hezbollah expert Ali Amine. Furthermore, under Bashar, Hezbollah started enjoying a greater margin of maneuver. The 2006 war between Israel and Hezbollah, which received Syria’s complete support, also strengthened the young president’s relations with the militant group. In 2010¹⁸ the relationship between Hezbollah, Iran, and Syria was made official by the tripartite meeting between Assad, Iran’s president, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, and Hassan Nasrallah in Damascus. “This meeting heralded the strategic alliance between the three factions,” pointed out a pro-Hezbollah expert, who spoke on condition of anonymity.

Hezbollah-Syria Symbiosis: The Post-2011 Phase

With the war in Syria intensifying, defections and losses within the Syrian army increased Assad’s reliance on Iran and its Lebanese proxy, Hezbollah, which deployed between 7,500 and 9,000 fighters in Syria, according to

(17) Interview with pro-Hezbollah expert on condition of anonymity.

(18) Avi Issacharoff, Jack Khoury, and Haaretz Correspondent, “Assa Hosts Nasrallah, Ahmadinejad for 3-way Meet,” updated February 26, 2010, <http://www.haaretz.com/news/assad-hosts-nasrallah-ahmadinejad-for-3-way-meet-1.263814>.

anti-Hezbollah activist Lokman Slim. Hezbollah trainers and advisers first provided expertise and the experience of guerilla warfare to the besieged Syrian army, before combat forces were officially deployed in 2013. Hezbollah was comprised of units trained in guerilla warfare, thanks to a long struggle against Israel. This complemented the capabilities of the Syrian army, which battalions consisted mainly of mechanized units.

Hezbollah's Early Involvement in Syria: From 2011 to 2013

When protests erupted in Syria in March 2011, Hezbollah's leader, Sayed Hassan Nasrallah, initially declared, the "Lebanese shouldn't interfere in what is going on in Syria, but let the Syrians themselves deal with the issue," adding that Hezbollah was committed to Syria's stability, security, and safety.¹⁹ A few months later, in September, the local Lebanese media outlet Ya Libnan reported the death of seven Hezbollah militants who had been involved in the pro-regime crackdown against protestors in Syria.²⁰

In October 2012, Nasrallah admitted that some Hezbollah fighters were protecting Lebanese Shiites living in border villages on Syrian territory.²¹ In August 2012,²² the United States added Hezbollah to a list of organizations subject to sanctions for their ties to the Syrian government. In October 2012, Nasrallah recognized that Hezbollah members were fighting in Syria when a senior commander, Ali Hussein Nassif, was publicly buried in Lebanon.²³ In January 2013, combat videos of Hezbollah fighters in the vicinity of the Sayida

(19) Nabki, "Nasrallah on Syria," <https://qifanabki.com/2011/05/26/some-arab-revolutions-are-more-equal-than-others/>.

(20) Yalibnan, "7 Hezbollah Fighters Killed in Syria," September 2, 2011, <http://yalibnan.com/2011/09/02/7-hezbollah-fighters-killed-in-syria/>.

(21) Nicholas Blanford, "Video Appears to Show Hezbollah and Iraqi Shiites Fighting in Syria," January 18, 2013, <http://www.csmonitor.com/World/Middle-East/2013/0118/Video-appears-to-show-Hezbollah-and-Iraqi-Shiites-fighting-in-Syria>.

(22) Al Jazeera, "US Adds Hezbollah to Syria Sanctions List," August 2012, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2012/08/2012810164625825716.html>.

(23) Alex Rowell, "Mapping Hezbollah's Syria War since 2011," December 8, 2015, <https://now.mmedia.me/lb/en/reportsfeatures/565725-mapping-hezbollahs-syria-war-since-2011>.

Zeinab were circulated.²⁴ Sayyida Zeinab is the site of the tomb of Zeinab, the daughter of Imam Ali, whom the Shiite community claim as their leader. It is also a major pilgrimage site for the Shiites. This slow escalation of Hezbollah involvement in Syria led to a backlash on the Lebanese level, and several rebel attacks were conducted on Hezbollah bastions and Shiite areas in the Beqaa Valley and Beirut. The first was in May 2013, when two rockets struck Hezbollah's stronghold in southern Beirut. The escalation could be linked to the open war promised by Nasrallah, who vowed in April 2013 that "Syria has real friends in the region and across the world that will not let the country fall into the hands of the US, Israel, or takfirist."²⁵ This speech appears to have followed a visit by Nasrallah to Tehran²⁶, where he met with the head of the IRGC, Qassem Soleimani, and Iran's leader, Ali Khamenei. Nasrallah's visit to Tehran was followed a few months later, in May, by the launch of a large military campaign in Qussayr, a Syrian region bordering Lebanon. Some 1,000 to 1,500 fighters were deployed and another 200 were killed, according to a Hezbollah fighter interviewed by the author, who spoke on condition of anonymity.²⁷ Hezbollah forces attacked rebel positions in al-Qussayr thus stalling their offensive in Homs city.²⁸ The fall of Qussayr in September 2013 marked an important turning point in the Syrian conflict, underlining Hezbollah's prominent role there. The Qussayr campaign dovetailed with a covert war between Hezbollah and Syrian rebels, which targeted Hezbollah areas in Lebanon with rocket shelling and bombings. During summer 2013, roadside bombings targeted Hezbollah convoys in the Beqaa Valley.²⁹

(24) Blanford, "Video Appears to Show," <http://www.csmonitor.com/World/Middle-East/2013/0118/Video-appears-to-show-Hezbollah-and-Iraqi-Shiites-fighting-in-Syria>.

(25) Now, "Nasrallah: 'Friends' Will Defend Assad Regime," updated May 2, 2013, <https://now.mmedia.me/lb/en/archive/nasrallah-friends-of-assad-regime-will-not-let-it-fall>.

(26) <http://www.defenddemocracy.org/media-hit/the-iran-syria-nexus-and-its-implications-for-the-region/>

(27) Interview with a Hezbollah fighter, January 2017.

(28) Institute for the Study of War, "Syria Update: The Fall of Al-Qusayr," June 6, 2013, <http://understandingwar.org/backgrounder/syria-update-fall-al-qusayr>.

(29) Mona Alami, "The War between Hezbollah and Isis in Lebanon," December 12, 2015, <http://www.newsweek.com/war-between-hezbollah-and-isis-lebanon-404244>.

In August 2013,³⁰ a car bomb struck southern Beirut, killing 20 people and wounding more than 100. A Sunni group calling itself the Brigades of Aisha claimed responsibility and promised more operations against Hezbollah. A few months later, the bombings evolved into suicide attacks. On November 19, 2013, two suicide bombings rocked the Iranian embassy in Lebanon, killing at least 23 people, including an Iranian cultural attaché and three embassy guards.³¹ The Abdullah Azzam Brigades, a Lebanon-based Palestinian organization with links to al-Qaeda, claimed responsibility. This suicide bombing was followed by several others claimed by Jabhat al-Nusra (JN), an offshoot of al-Qaida, and more recently by the Islamic State (ISIS) in Lebanon.

As the war between Hezbollah and the rebels intensified in Lebanon, in November 2013 the party launched a massive attack on the border area of Qalamoun, besieging the main towns and gradually capturing Nabk, Rankous, and finally Yabrud, which fell in March 2014. Yabrud was not only a strategic gain for Hezbollah but also very symbolic to the rebels, as illustrated by a Syrian rebel song titled, “Dig Your Grave in Yabrud.”³² Rebels fleeing Hezbollah’s takeover encroached on the Lebanese Syrian mountainous border of Qalamoun, which they occupy to this date. From 2013 onward, Hezbollah also expanded its foothold in areas north of Syria around the Shiite villages of Nubl and Zahraa, and from north of Aleppo to south of Daraa. Hezbollah commandos also provided expertise and support to regime forces in Homs and Damascus. It was reported at the time that Hezbollah units were engaged alongside the IRGC and the Syrian army in the fight against rebels in the suburbs of the Syrian capital.³³ Hezbollah also

(30) Al Jazeera, “Car Bombing Rocks Hezbollah Bastion in Beirut,” August 2013, <http://www.al-jazeera.com/news/middleeast/2013/08/2013815152140188564.html>.

(31) Erika Solomon, “Al Qaeda-Linked Group Claims Beirut Bombings,” February 19, 2014, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-lebanon-blast-idUSBREA110BQ20140219>.

(32) “إحفر قبرك في يبرود,” February 23, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4XZTB2rKI5Y>.

(33) World Tribune, “Hizbullah from Lebanon’s Bekaa Valley Battling Syrian Rebels in Damascus Suburbs,” January 8, 2013, <http://www.worldtribune.com/archives/hizbullah-from-lebanons-bekaa-valley-battling-syrian-rebels-in-damascus-suburbs/>.

expanded its geographical presence to Homs, where it fought alongside the Syrian army, trapping thousands of civilians in the city.³⁴

Hezbollah from Damascus to Aleppo: From 2013 to 2016

The end of 2013 and beginning of 2014 were marked by Hezbollah's increased attention to the areas surrounding Damascus. Hezbollah had been fighting near Damascus around the Sayida Zeinab shrine³⁵ since 2012. The capital and surrounding regions were not only considered to be the center of power for President Bashar Assad, the area was also a strategic supply line for Hezbollah's weapons coming from Iran through the Damascus Beirut highway. Hezbollah's increased activity in Damascus was underscored by an increased frequency of Israeli strikes against the party's positions and its military convoys in and around the city. In December 2014,³⁶ the *Washington Post* reported that Israeli warplanes had bombed targets in territory held by the Syrian government near Damascus. In fact, Israel has carried out multiple attacks on Syria since early 2013. Previous Israeli strikes appear to have been aimed at deterring shipments of Iranian missiles and other weaponry to the Lebanese Shiite Hezbollah movement. These attacks were launched in 2015 and 2016, with the latest occurring on December 7, when the Israeli army targeted Hezbollah positions in the Zabadani area. The air strikes in Syria were the second attack within a week to be attributed to Israel.³⁷

Hezbollah was also involved in the siege of Ghouta; the party was behind the famous Kamin Daiba. The Daiba attacks resulted in the death of 170 rebels

(34) Reuters, "Assad's Forces, Hezbollah Hammer Syria's Homs," July 5, 2013, <http://www.jpost.com/Middle-East/Assads-forces-Hezbollah-fighters-hammer-Syrian-city-of-Homs-318879>.

(35) Anne Barnard, "Hezbollah Commits to an All-Out Fight to Save Assad," May 25, 2013, <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/05/26/world/middleeast/syrian-army-and-hezbollah-step-up-raids-on-rebels.html>.

(36) Liz Sly and Suzan Haidamous, "Israel Bombs Syria in Attacks Probably Aimed at Hezbollah," December 7, 2014, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/israel-bombs-syria-in-attacks-probably-aimed-at-hezbollah/2014/12/07/dc0040d6-7e3e-11e4-b936-f3afab0155a7_story.html?utm_term=.93f89c4e1c6f.

(37) For more information, see Mona Alami, "Hezbollah, Israel Both Mum on Recent Escalation," December 21, 2016, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/ru/originals/2016/12/israel-hezbollah-war-attacks-syria-golan-heights.html#ixzz4Zu5xzPbn>.

and were conducted by Hezbollah and conceived by the infamous Abou Alaa Bosna, a militant who had fought in the Bosnian war and who was killed in Syria in 2016.³⁸

The 2015 phase underscored Hezbollah's determination to regain control of the Damascus suburbs. On July 3, 2015, Hezbollah and the Syrian army launched an offensive against Zabadani, another town that was strategic for Hezbollah's supply line. There Hezbollah applied the successful siege tactics used in Qalamoun with a new twist: starving the local populations. It is interesting that the Zabadani siege only came to an end after a common Iranian and Turkish mediation, in which the regime was absent. An agreement was finally reached on September 24,³⁹ which led to the rebels surrendering their weapons before their transfer to Idlib. It is also interesting that two rounds of negotiations were conducted in August during brief ceasefire periods. These negotiations aimed to secure both the withdrawal of rebels from Zabadani and a safe departure for the Shia populations in the Shia villages of Kefraya and Foua, regime-held enclaves in Idlib province. Concomitantly with the attack on Zabadani, Hezbollah launched the siege of Madaya,⁴⁰ which resulted this April in the displacement of thousands.⁴¹ Both the Madaya and the Zabadani battles followed the same principle: forcing the opposition into submission with a fierce siege and thus starving the population. These sieges, which were followed by "deals," made possible an important regime and Hezbollah objective: achieving demographic changes in sensitive areas around the capital.

As the battle of Zabadani ended, Hezbollah fighters started moving north en masse to Aleppo. Before attacking Aleppo, Nasrallah instructed some 200 of

(38) <http://nn-lb.com/news.php?go=fullnews&newsid=5270>.

(39) IISS Voices, "Philemon Leenhardt: Lebanon, Hizbullah and the battle of Zabadani," October 23, 2015, <https://www.iiss.org/en/iiss%20voices/blogsections/iiss-voices-2015-dda3/october-9d0c/lebanon-zabadani-92d4>.

(40) Avi Asher-Schapiro, "'The Regime Want People to Die There': Assad and Hezbollah Are 'Starving People Into Submission' In Western Syria," January 6, 2016, <http://www.businessinsider.com/hezbollah-siege-of-madaya-in-syria-2016-1>.

(41) <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/04/exchange-residents-begins-evacuation-deal-170414051642212.html>.

his commanders to capture the northern capital in a swift battle, even if that meant the loss of 10,000 of its militants, explains a Hezbollah commander named Abou Ali, who spoke to the author on condition of anonymity. In June 2016 Nasrallah declared, “The defense of Aleppo is the defense of the rest of Syria, it is the defense of Damascus. It is also the defense of Lebanon, and of Iraq,” he said. “We will increase our presence in Aleppo . . . retreat is not permissible.”⁴² Aleppo was split between government control in the West and rebel control in the East. In summer 2016, Russian and Syrian warplanes shelled the road leading from the rebel-held areas in the North toward the Turkish border. In the battle to capture eastern Aleppo, Hezbollah had a dual role: it helped thwart suicide attacks, and it led offensive operations. “Hezbollah sharp shooters stood their ground and opened fire, blowing up the trucks before they could hit their targets,” according to Reuters⁴³. With their support, pro-Assad forces consolidated their positions around Aleppo and in February severed the most direct supply route from Turkey to the rebels, the Castello Road.⁴⁴ According to interviews with Hezbollah fighters and experts, the organization lost around 200 fighters in the siege of Aleppo alone.

Hezbollah in Southern Syria

Since the beginning of the war, Hezbollah and Iran have both viewed southern Syria with great concern. The region, which is home to several communities (Sunnis, Christians, and Druze), falls on the strategic border of the occupied Golan Heights. In January 2015, Jihad Mughniyeh, Hezbollah’s commander of the Syrian Golan sector and the son of Hezbollah commander Imad Mughniyeh, was killed by an Israeli air strike in the Syrian province of Quneitra, near

(42) Al Jazeera, “Hezbollah to Send More Fighters to Syria’s Aleppo,” June 2016, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/06/hezbollah-send-fighters-syria-aleppo-160624180847854.html>.

(43) Tom Perry, Laila Bassam, Suleiman Al-Khalidi and Tom Miles, “Hezbollah, Other Shi’ite allies Helped Assad Win in Aleppo,” December 14, 2016, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-aleppo-fall-insi-idUSKBN1431PV>.

(44) Ibid.

Israel's Golan Heights.⁴⁵ Four other Hezbollah fighters were killed in the strike, including Mohammad Issa, an Iranian commander in the Syrian Golan Heights, Abu Ali al-Tabtabai, and Ismail al-Ashhab. According to the Lebanese website Now Lebanon,⁴⁶ in February 2015, in what was initially billed as a major new campaign and involving over 4,500 fighters, Hezbollah spearheaded a push into a rebel-held triangle of territory in southern Syria between Damascus, Daraa, and Quneitra. The campaign was named "Operation Martyrs of Quneitra," in reference to the Israeli air strike in January. In December 2015, Syrian reports claimed Israel killed the notorious Hezbollah figure Samir Quntar using surface-to-surface missiles fired from within Israel. It was believed Hezbollah was training militiamen and Syrian government forces near the area of the strikes and that Quntar was posed to lead a new "resistance" movement in Syria. "Samir Qunatr's men also received training from Hezbollah," confirmed a Hezbollah trainer on condition of anonymity. According to a Hezbollah commander interviewed by this author, Hezbollah's presence since 2016 has been limited to an expert and adviser role, with Iranian soldiers playing a greater role on the ground; this information was confirmed by anti-Hezbollah activist Lokman Slim, who added that Iran directly opened a liaison office with the Druze community in Syria following the death of Quntar, who himself was a Lebanese Druze. The new "resistance" was dovetailed by Shiification efforts, according to the work of Syria expert Aymen Jawad Tamimi, who reported the establishment of a "center for conversion to Shia Islam in Suwayda' city . . . known as Liwa Zain al-Abidain, whose base is on the Tariq Qanawat. This center has managed to convert dozens of the Druze to Shii Islam. We have come to know two of them from the house of Abu Maghhdhab and four from the house of al-Mahithawi."⁴⁷

(45) Dov Lieber, "Syria Blames Israel for Overnight Attack on a Military Airbase," December 7, 2016, <http://www.timesofisrael.com/syria-blames-israel-for-overnight-strikes-on-a-military-airbase/>

(46) Rowell, "Mapping Hezbollah's Civil War," <https://now.mmedia.me/lb/en/reportsfeatures/565725-mapping-hezbollahs-syria-war-since-2011>

(47) Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, "Harakat al-Hawiya al-Arabiya al-Druziya: Defending Druze Identity in Suwayda'," Match 6, 2016, <http://www.aymennjawad.org/18573/harakat-al-hawiya-al-arabiya-al-druziya-defending>.

Hezbollah's structure in Syria

It is very difficult to assess Hezbollah deployment in Syria, but experts close to the organization as well as anti-Hezbollah activists have estimated the number of Hezbollah fighters at from 7000 to 9,000, with the number fluctuating depending on the needs of the conflict at any given time. According to the Hezbollah expert General Amine Hoteit, the militant group boasts a deployment capability of some 60,000, with at least 20,000 full-time fighters and about 20,000 reservists. Hezbollah units are divided into the *Fawj* (brigade), which can include 1,000 to 1,500 fighters; *Saraya* (company), with a different breakdown of over 100 fighters; *Fassil* (unit), with around 40 fighters; and *Majmouaa* (group), with 5 to 10 fighters. The size of the *Majmouaa* varies: “we can be a dozen and as little as six or seven,” said Abou Hassan, a Hezbollah fighter who led such a group in Damascus.

The highest level of leadership is designated to the Majlis Jihadi⁴⁸ (which decides all things military and security) and is generally selected by the Hezbollah Shurah Council. The Majlis Jihadi oversees various in Kitaat, or departments; they may be organized according to the weapons used or as a geographical deployment, according to General Hoteit.

Hezbollah's traditional geographical units include the Nasr Unit, which is generally positioned between the blue line (the Israel-Lebanon border) and the Litani, and the Badr Unit, positioned in the Beqaa Valley. It is not clear if some of these units have been deployed in Syria, with the exception of the Radwan units, which presence there has been confirmed by Hezbollah fighters. Others units deployed in Syria are Hezbollah's non-Shiite fighters, which are affiliated with the Lebanese Resistance Brigades (Saraya al-Muqawama al-Lubnania). “This structure was applicable to the 2006 war but it's very fluid and has probably changed since,” said Hezbollah expert Nicolas Blanford. However, in some cases it seems some of these factions are still operational

(48) Leith Fadel, “Exclusive: The Hezbollah Military Command Structure,” May 28, 2015, <https://www.almasdarnews.com/article/exclusive-the-hezbollah-military-command-structure/>.

in Syria. In an interview with the author, a Hezbollah fighter specified that the Radwan forces are included within the offensive teams, which were generally followed by *Kowat Tadakhol* (expeditionary forces) in many battles in Syria.

The role of Hezbollah in Syria has been essentially threefold: providing offensive support during battle, holding strategic territory that is subject to frequent assaults, and training pro-regime militias. Interviews with Hezbollah and members of the opposition attest that in many cases Hezbollah was the ground assault force for the Syrian army; this first transpired in the battle for Qussayr. In an interview with this author in 2013, a Hezbollah fighter admitted, “Hezbollah is leading operations in Qusayr; the Syrian army is only playing a secondary role, deploying after an area is completely ‘cleaned’ and secured.”⁴⁹ According to a report by the Institute for the Study of War, “the Syrian government showed that it can use Hezbollah fighters, and possibly Iraqi and Iranian fighters, as a reliable infantry force alongside its own heavy weapons and airpower.” Typically (and with Russian support later in 2015), operations were conducted by “heavy preparatory bombardment followed by the infiltration of irregular allied units, and finally armor-supported infantry attacks.”⁵⁰ A Hezbollah fighter interviewed by the author explained: “Our attacks are very well planned, our advance is first insured by airplane bombings which clean out terrain. Russia provides us precious technological guidance in the form of tactical controllers” (a controller deployed in the vicinity of the target would be communicating directly with the pilot or with ground forces and giving final guidance on the strike).⁵¹

Similar techniques were witnessed both in Zabadani and in Aleppo. In Zabadani the joint forces made extensive use of barrel bombs, dropped by the Syrian air force’s planes and helicopters, and heavy artillery shelling, notably

(49) Mona Alami, “Hezbollah Fighter Details Ops in Qusayr,” April 6, 2013, <https://now.mmedia.me/lb/en/interviews/hezbollah-fighter-details-ops-in-qusayr>.

(50) Institute for the Study of War, “Syria Update: The Fall of Al-Qusayr,” June 6, 2013, <http://understandingwar.org/background/syria-update-fall-al-qusayr>.

(51) Interview with a Hezbollah fighter, January 2017.

through ground-to-ground missiles.. A similar method was used in Aleppo initially. More details on the offensive were provided by Hezbollah fighters. One commander admitted that the organization relied on a three-pronged formation to advance into “enemy” territory: an offense team securing the area, then a demining team, and finally a stabilization team (*Tathbeet*). The last team is typically deployed for from as little as one month to two years, says Hezbollah commander Abou Ali. “We increased pressure on the “terrorists” by slowly diminishing the territory they held,” he explained, adding that the front lines were divided into sections manned by various factions, such as the Iraqis, Hezbollah, and the Iranians, and all of which were managed by a common operations center. Militants also practiced on a wide range of Iranian weapons, from the Toophan (a series of antitank missiles), to the Karrar, an Iranian military drone that can hit high-speed targets, and the Qassam rocket, which locks onto the heat signature of helicopters and other aircrafts.

In addition to its offensive role, Hezbollah has played a key role in the regime’s development of effective irregular forces. It reportedly provides training and advice to local militia groups, Popular Committee elements, and the National Defense Army, all of which are playing a growing role in the regime’s defense. The organization has created several major training centers such as the one in Qussayr, which, over the last five years, according to Abou Ali, has trained some 120,000 fighters, including 80,000 earmarked for a new fighting force. Abou Ali’s estimation may nonetheless be an exaggeration. A Hezbollah trainer who was also interviewed by the author underlines that while thousands of troops have been trained across Syria, some 10,000 have been trained alone in Qussary, Hezbollah’s largest training facility in Syria, “These trainings take from three days to several months depending upon capabilities ranging from combat, sniper fire, handling explosive or manning tanks among many others,” said the trainer, on condition of anonymity. The Hezbollah trainer also explained that dozens of trainers were deployed in various Syrian regions and that the training provided by Hezbollah also included an ideological dimension, which was one of the roadblocks to any formation. “We also provide training

for reconnaissance missions, manning explosives and training elite forces and our program differs depending on geographical location as our trainees are formed to fight in different environments from mountainous areas to the *badia* [desert],” explained the trainer.

The “Hezbollahization” of Syria

Nearly a year after the start of the Syrian revolution, Iran and its Lebanese proxy, Hezbollah, started to shore up the Assad regime by creating and supporting paramilitary forces that operated alongside the Syrian army. These militias resemble, in many ways, those that have come to constitute the Iraq Popular Mobilization Forces (known in Arabic as the Hashd Shaabi). Many of these militias have some sort of relationship with Lebanese Hezbollah. According to research⁵² by Aymen Jawad Tamimi, a fellow at the Middle East Forum, these local militias include Quwat Rhidha, the National Ideological Resistance (NIR), Liwaa al-Imam al-Mahdi, Junud Mahdi, and the Mahdi scouts among many others. Tamimi believes that Quwat al-Ridha is the core nucleus for Hezbollah in Syria and seems to be operating under the leadership and supervision of Hezbollah in Lebanon. Quwat al-Ridha includes Shia and Sunni hailing from countryside areas around cities such as Homs, Aleppo, Daraa, and Damascus.

In an interview, Maan Talaa, a researcher on pro-regime militias from the Turkey-based think tank Omran Dirastat, explained that Quwat Ridha is estimated at 3,500 fighters and its military leadership is headed by Syrians, but the organization is financed and trained by Hezbollah. According to Talaa, two other groups can be directly linked to Hezbollah, the Liwaa al-Imam al-Mehdi and Assad Allah Ghaleb. Talaa explained that Liwaa al-Imam al-Mehdi was estimated at 2,000 fighters, who are mostly Alawites. “Assad Allah Ghaleb played a role in Ghouta, but they appear to have been decimated in battles,”

(52) Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, “Bibliography: Pro-Assad Militias,” August 30, 2016, <http://www.aymennjawad.org/2016/08/bibliography-pro-assad-militias>.

said Talaa. “The Imam Mehdi Scouts are comprised of about 800. Other groups that are directly linked to Hezbollah also include Fawj Imam Hajjaj (about 600 fighters), Shuhada Nubl Zahraa (about 200 fighters), Fawj Tadakhol Khass (about 200), and Jounoud Mehdi, which are deployed in the Sheikh Najar District in Aleppo (about 300 fighters),” he added. Other groups include Liwaa Saraya Muqawama Suriya, headed by Samir Quntar, which was also directly supported by Hezbollah, according to this expert. The latter group shares a similar ideology with Hezbollah Lebanon in terms of its messaging, its brand, and its affiliation to Wilayat al-faqih.⁵³

The Omran Dirasat researcher emphasized that many other groups are the result of a joint venture between Hezbollah and Iran. “In such cases, Iran generally bankrolls the groups while Hezbollah provides training,” he explained. Such groups include Hezbollah Syria, which includes some 1,500 members of the Shiite community from Tartous, the rural Aleppo region in Damascus. Another group is the Harakat Shabab Al Fedaeyeen Falasteneeyen: Firkat Jaleel, amounting to 1,000 people, who are under direct Hezbollah leadership and are earmarked for the fight against the Islamic State and deployed recently in Deir Zour. “There are also obscure links between Hezbollah and Hezbollah Afghanistan that emerged in Syria, although there is no tally on the number of fighters the group possesses,” said Talaa.

Hezbollah has also learned to work with foreign battalions. According to Hezbollah commander Abou Ali, Hezbollah units worked with Afghani and Yemeni forces near Damascus, around the shrine of Sit Zeinab, “some of whose fighters had been trained by Hezbollah as well as Iran.”

Other groups are common ventures between Hezbollah, the IRCG, and Iraqi Shiite militias, according to Talaa. Such ventures include Kataeb Sayed Shuhadaa, Liwaa Zulfiqar, Liwaa Amar Bin Yasser, and Jaysh Shaabi. “Since

(53) Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, “The National Ideological Resistance in Syria: A ‘Syrian Hezbollah’ Brand,” October 11, 2014, <http://www.joshualandis.com/blog/national-ideological-resistance-syria-syrian-hezbollah-brand/>.

2015, Hezbollah is also training elite forces from Itihad Shabibat Thawra, which are composed of students affiliated to the Syrian Baath,” Talaa added.

Conclusion

Six years of war in Syria have resulted in major lessons for military players there, whether at the level of conventional armies or of nonstate armed actors such as Hezbollah. The conflict will certainly positively impact Hezbollah’s future fighting strategy by spurring the organization to develop a variety of new skill sets. In addition, Hezbollah developed from a local militant movement in Lebanon to a regional actor either operating in an advising position or directly involved in different war theaters, from Syria to Iraq and Yemen. Yet the expanding role of Hezbollah and the fact that it is engaged in a war against other Muslims have exposed the organization’s weaknesses: a high number of casualties, a neutralization of its war front against Israel, the death of a number of its cadres, a lower morale of the organization cadres, increased financial pressure on the organization aggravated by international sanctions, possible divisions between Hezbollah and its allies in Syria, and the tarnishing of its image regionally. For now at least, Hezbollah appears nonetheless to have been able to mitigate these adverse impacts and consolidate its power at the Lebanese and Syrian levels.

Benefits

Hezbollah has been practicing a new set of war-fighting skills in Syria. This entails calling in strikes, providing improved logistics to the troops that are deployed, improving offensive operations skills, and learning to hold and control ground. “Hezbollah moved from an entity always fighting the same enemy in the same place (Israel in South Lebanon) to multiple new war theaters, from barren mountains to flat agricultural areas and inner cities, all of which are unfamiliar to the organization’s cadres,” said Blanford. Hezbollah trained its fighters to defend their southern Lebanese villages

against the IDF, fighting as a guerrilla force. During the 2006 war, Hezbollah deployed small units to these villages. Some such units were self-sufficient and possessed various weapons systems, such as antitank guided missiles (ATGMs) and explosives. In Syria this role has evolved from defense to the seizure and holding of territory. Whereas earlier units were small, groups of hundreds of fighters were now being deployed, and success now required coordinating with aerial and artillery assets. “Hezbollah has learned to fight in larger unit sizes and alongside other militaries which it has never done before. It even boasts an armored brigade today. It has also learned how to use intelligence and reconnaissance to develop more complex offensive operations,” added Blandford.

General Hoteit appears to share this opinion, and he emphasizes that Hezbollah has managed to develop its infantry and its use of tanks and rocket launchers thanks to the Syrian war. The organization has morphed into a hybrid army that could fight a guerilla war as well as it could operate like a conventional army. A testament to the evolution is the military parade held by Hezbollah in Qussayr in November 2016. The news website Now Lebanon reported at the time that “among the arms and vehicles on display were Soviet-made T-72 tanks and KS-12A anti-aircraft cannons; Russian Kornet anti-tank missiles (mounted, in some cases, on quad bikes); dune buggy–mounted machine guns; and off-road motorbikes. Significantly, the parade also featured American-manufactured M113 armored personnel carriers (APCs), of the type provided by the United States to the Lebanese army (LAF).”⁵⁴

In Syria, Hezbollah appears to have also bolstered its use of unmanned airborne vehicles. During an interview a Hezbollah fighter told the author, “We are definitely learning a lot by working with Russians and Iranians in the Syria war and more specifically when it comes to UAVs [unmanned aerial vehicles].” By 2014, Hezbollah had launched its first successful armed drone

(54) Alex Rowell, “Hezbollah Flaunts American Equipment in Syria Parade,” November 14, 2016, <https://now.mmedia.me/lb/en/NewsReports/567500-hezbollah-flaunts-american-equipment-in-syria-parade>.

attack, on the headquarters of the Nusra Front at Lebanon's border with Syria, according to General Hoteit. The attack was launched in September 2014, with the aim of bombing a Jabhat al-Nusra (JN) command post along the Syria-Lebanon border. "UAVs are used for reconnaissance, kamikaze-style strikes or targeted bombing," said Hoteit. According to video evidence, the Lebanese militant group has used small, cheap UAVs to drop bombs on Syrian rebels in northern Syria. A video posted on YouTube in August last year shows what appears to be shrapnel bombs being launched from micro-drones operated by Hezbollah. The *Times of Israel* said the bombs shown in the video were Chinese-made MZD-2 submunitions.⁵⁵ According to the article, the MZD-2 generally contains an explosive charge, wrapped in tiny plastic or metal balls.

The war in Syria has enabled Hezbollah to expand its regional foothold, moving from a guerrilla organization to a hybrid regional actor, and thus allowing Iran to project its power across the Arab world. According to an article written by Blanford for *Jane's Defense*, since 2014, Hezbollah has had a presence in Iraq, where it is currently providing training and military advice to the Al-Hashd al-Shaabi (Popular Mobilization Units, or PMU), the 150,000-strong umbrella group for various Shia militias under the guidance of the Iranian IRGC. as part of the broader effort to defeat the Islamic State. and it maintains a covert military assistance mission in Yemen where it is training the Ansar Allah militia battling the Saudi Arabia-led coalition and its Yemeni allies. "In Iraq, Hezbollah fields between 250 and 500 specialist cadres who first deployed in mid-June 2014 in response to the seizure of Mosul in northern Iraq by the Islamic State and the group's subsequent southbound advance towards Baghdad," Blanford explained.⁵⁶ This information was also confirmed to the author by a Hezbollah fighter, who reported the presence of the organization's cadres in Mosul. In addition, sources close to Hezbollah told the author that the organization had fighters in Yemen

(55) Judah Ari Gross, "Video Appears to Confirm Use of Attack Drones by Hezbollah," August 11, 2016, <http://www.timesofisrael.com/video-appears-to-confirm-use-of-attack-drones-by-hezbollah-in-syria/>.

(56) Nicholas Blanford, "Hizbullah's Expanded Role in Syria Threatens Israel," 2017, http://www.janes.com/images/assets/885/68885/Hizbullahs_expanded_role_in_Syria_threatens_Israel.pdf.

and that Houthi troops trained and were treated medically in Lebanon regularly. In January 2017, an al-Arabiya report⁵⁷ quoted a Houthi militia leader who confessed that both Iran and Hezbollah have been heavily involved in training their fighters. The article cited Abu Mohammed, who was in charge of rocket attacks in the al-Nihm district in Yemen, and explained that there were Iranian experts and Lebanese from Hezbollah militias currently in Saada. These were helping run secret training facilities. Iran has developed an interest in supporting the Houthi Ansar Allah, especially since the beginning of the Saudi-led Operation Decisive Storm in March 2015, which allows it to put pressure on Saudi Arabia.

Weaknesses

Despite the benefits drawn from the war in Syria, the involvement of Hezbollah across the border has levied a toll on the organization. Intervention in Syria has come at a great price in terms of casualties, the death of prominent members, and the neutralization of Hezbollah's warfront on Israel, which lowered morale among its fighters. Intervention has also brought about financial problems, disputes with Hezbollah's allies in Syria, and the tarnishing of its image as a resistance movement in the eyes of Sunnis across the region

Hezbollah has had a number of casualties in Syria. According to experts and sources close to the organization, it has lost about 2,500 people and suffered over 7,000 injured, some of whom were left with severe injuries. Israel prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu openly acknowledged that Israel had conducted dozens of strikes on Hezbollah in Syria.⁵⁸ Hezbollah has lost individuals across the border who were important from both a military and symbolic standpoint. One of those killed was Jihad Mughniyeh, the son of Hezbollah's notorious operations chief Imad Mughniyeh, who was assassinated in 2008 in Damascus.

(57) Al Arabiya English, "Houthi Commander Admits: Iran Training Us," January 15, 2017, <https://english.alarabiya.net/en/News/gulf/2017/01/15/Houthi-confessions-Iran-trains-our-militias.html>.

(58) Yaakov Lappin, "Analysis: Assessing the Covert War between IDF and Hezbollah," July 12, 2016, <http://www.jpost.com/Arab-Israeli-Conflict/Assessing-the-covert-war-between-the-IDF-and-Hezbollah-460144>.

In December 2015,⁵⁹ Hezbollah commander Samir Kuntar, who was working on developing a new brigade in the Golan area, was killed in an air strike in Syria. Finally in May, Moustapha Badredine, a Hezbollah star commander, was killed in a mysterious explosion in Syria. According to the Blanford paper published by *Jane's*, the Hezbollah-run Rassoul al-Azzam hospital in southern Beirut handles a steady turnover of casualties from Syrian battlefields.⁶⁰ In 2016, Hezbollah purchased the St. George Hospital in the nearby suburb of Hadeth, south of Beirut, to take up the overflow.

The war in Syria also seems to be thus slowly eroding Hezbollah's policy of "equilibrium," which calls for retaliation against every perceived Israeli strike and provided the organization with powerful deterrence capabilities. When Imad Mughniyeh was killed, Hezbollah responded by firing Kornet guided missiles at the IDF in Mount Dov, killing a soldier and commander. After Kuntar's killing the response was milder; Hezbollah only targeted two armored military vehicles in Israel.

According to Blanford's paper, "the war in Syria has had an impact not only on the Shia support base in Lebanon, given the cost of the conflict on the community, but also among the cadres themselves. *Jane's* has heard numerous anecdotes of fighters refusing to serve further tours in Syria or others who have left the organization altogether. While the phenomenon of dissent is believed to be relatively minimal, it is unprecedented for an organization that traditionally boasts a cast iron sense of discipline and vibrant esprit de corps."⁶¹

Alongside the human toll, Hezbollah's effort in Syria has affected the group's finances, possibly hindering its broad social-service efforts in Lebanon in the

(59) Times of Israel Staff, "Terror Chief Samir Juntar Killed in Reported Israeli Strike in Syria," December 20, 2015, <http://www.timesofisrael.com/samir-kuntar-said-killed-in-israeli-strike/>.

(60) Nicholas Blanford, "Hizbullah's Expanded Role in Syria Threatens Israel," 2017, http://www.janes.com/images/assets/885/68885/Hizbullahs_expanded_role_in_Syria_threatens_Israel.pdf.

(61) Nicholas Blanford, "Hizbullah's Expanded Role in Syria Threatens Israel," 2017, http://www.janes.com/images/assets/885/68885/Hizbullahs_expanded_role_in_Syria_threatens_Israel.pdf.

longer term. Hezbollah's engagement on several regional fronts means that its resources will be distributed to a wider number of causes. A related trend was underlined by the sister of a Hezbollah fighter who had died in Syria. Speaking on condition of anonymity in a previous interview, she remarked that the family's compensation was smaller than the amounts distributed during the 2006 war with Israel. In addition, a U.S. law passed in December 2015 now forbids Lebanese banks from dealing with the group. This restriction is reverberating across the organization's vast network of social services. According to an article in the *Daily Star*, nurses and doctors as well as administrators and teachers who work for the organization "are being frozen out of the banking system as lenders close the accounts of hospitals, media firms and charities linked to Hezbollah." The services are crucial to Hezbollah's long-term popularity. According to the *Daily Star*, its network mainly serves impoverished areas, including 3 hospitals, 12 health centers, and 20 infirmaries, according to a 2009 study published by the Middle East Policy Council. The article concludes by asserting that Hezbollah recipient organizations, including those with mortgages and loans, risk being cut off from the Lebanese banking system.⁶²

Hezbollah's growing presence in Syria is not without consequences, however. Sources close to the organization report increasing clashes and growing resentment from Syrian officers toward Hezbollah fighters. Hezbollah commander Abou Ali attributes the mistrust between the two parties to Syrian soldiers abandoning their positions during battle. "Syrian soldiers are mistreated by their superiors, which translates into a lack of loyalty to the army. Things are now looking much better though, with the military institution being restructured," he added. Clashes were not limited to confrontations with Hezbollah's Syrian counterparts, however. Abou Ali's comrade, who calls himself Abu Hassan, said that there had also been clashes between Iranian forces and Hezbollah, although they are rare.

(62) Donna Abu-Nasr, "Hezbollah Losses Mount on Financial Front," June 16, 2016, <http://www.dailystar.com.lb/Business/Local/2016/Jun-16/357174-hezbollah-losses-mount-on-financial-front.ashx>.

“There was a recent incident in Tell Eiss, when a disagreement between Hezbollah fighters and Iranian forces over their insufficient backing during battle escalated into a bloody confrontation when a Hezbollah fighter called Zulfikar killed several Iranians,” said Abu Hassan. However, this incident that could not be confirmed independently by the author. While Zulfikar is a common *nom de guerre* among Hezbollah fighters, it is worth mentioning that it was also the name of Hezbollah commander Moustapha Badredine, who was killed under mysterious circumstances. An Israeli military official told the AP news agency that Badredine had been killed by his own men.⁶³ The official provided no evidence, however. The AP said Israeli intelligence believed Badredine had been feuding with Iranian military commanders in Syria over heavy Hezbollah losses.

Hezbollah finds itself at a critical juncture both internally and regionally. Fundamental questions about the group’s identity and reputation have once again come to the fore. The organization has changed from a pan-Arab movement enjoying wide support to a sectarian militia promoting Iran’s controversial agenda across the Arab world. The decline in Hezbollah’s reputation was triggered by the assassination of Lebanese Sunni prime minister Rafic Hariri in 2005, followed by a spat of killings targeting members of parliament, journalists, and ministers opposing Syria and the Lebanese militia. Four Hezbollah members are currently being prosecuted for allegedly masterminding Hariri’s assassination. Hezbollah’s takeover of Beirut and the Druze Mountain in 2008 further damaged its reputation. Its unilateral decision to fight in Syria alongside the regime of president Bashar Assad, after agreeing to the Baabda declaration on distancing Lebanon from regional conflicts, further hindered its credibility. In a 2015 Zogby poll, 96% of Egyptians said Hezbollah was contributing to increased extremism, and 86% of Jordanians also had a negative view of the organization.⁶⁴

(63) The New Arab, “Israel Claims Leading Hizbollah Official Killed in Iran-Linked Feud, March 21, 2017, <https://www.alaraby.co.uk/english/news/2017/3/21/israel-claims-leading-hizballah-official-killed-in-iran-linked-feud>.

(64) Zoe Hu, “The History of Hezbollah, from Israel to Syria,” October 2016, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/10/history-hezbollah-israel-syria-161031053924273.html>.

Despite its regional decline, Hezbollah still enjoys widespread support at the level of its constituency. “The war in Syria has not affected the support of its community,” says Hezbollah expert and *Hayat* journalist Hazem Amine.

Hezbollah has two main vulnerabilities in Syria that could impact its capability to maintain leverage over its constituency. First, if tensions between Hezbollah and its allies in Syria increase and if it starts to experience a low- or medium-level insurgency, it will not be able to maintain its strong position across the border. Its second vulnerability is linked to its relation with its popular base. Unless Hezbollah can maintain its victorious narrative in Syria, insure an acceptable level of services to its support base, and curb the number of military casualties in Syria while shielding Lebanon from terrorism-related civilian deaths, the organization’s decisions regarding its Syrian involvement will be questioned by its broad base of supporters.

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King Faisal Center for Research and Islamic Studies (KFCRIS)

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The Center provides in-depth analysis on contemporary political issues, Saudi studies, North African and Arab Maghreb studies, Iranian studies, Asian studies, Modernity studies, Energy studies, and Arabic language studies. The Center also organizes conferences, collaborates with prestigious research centers around the world, employs a group of distinguished researchers, and maintains contacts with a wide range of independent experts in different disciplines. The Center is home to a library containing rare manuscripts, an Islamic art museum, King Faisal Memorial Hall, and a visiting fellows program. The Center aims to expand the scope of existing literature and research so as to bring to the forefront of scholarly discussions the contributions and roles of Muslim societies in the humanities, the social sciences, literature, and arts—historically, as well as today.



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