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The effects of Hezbollah's involvement in Syria

Research paper

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1. Introduction

Hezbollah's¹ armed interference in the civil war of neighboring Syria is now ongoing for more than one and a half years. Its implications and outcomes have become more relevant, since the party encountered heavy losses and is gaining valuable combat experience in a new environment. Lebanon is on the edge of facing a serious spillover, with suicide bombing incidents happened and an increasing sectarian strife inside the country. This research paper therefore focuses on the effects of Hezbollah's decision to support its regional ally, the al-Assad regime, with armed and logistical backup. It will also discuss, if this interference came to the group's advantage or disadvantage.

Syrian rebels have shown, that they are willing to avenge Hezbollah's interference by taking the fight into Lebanon (Daily Star 2014d). Even at the home front, the involvement showed its effects, when Prime Minister Najib Mikati, who was in a political coalition with Hezbollah, resigned.

After outlining the methods used in this paper, it gives a short overview of Hezbollah's involvement in the Syrian civil war and, after that, examines its effects on two dimensions: First, the following ramifications for the group itself, and second, the impact on Lebanese society at large and external Hezbollah consequences.

2. Methodology

The initial idea for this essay was the creation of a short expert digest on the research question, with different analytical statements by representatives of, more or less political, institutions such as Carnegie Middle East Center, UNIFIL, Dr. Makdisi (AUB) and the Daily Star, among others. None of them replied to requests for interviews. Only the Lebanese Armed Forces declined a comment over landline due to the fact this would be a „political statement“ and the press division is not able

¹ Hezbollah (or Hizb Allah, Hizbullah), „Party of God“, is a Shi'a Islamist political party. For an introduction into the party's structures, goals and practices, see D. Avon/M. Khatchadourian, *Hezbollah. A History of the 'Party of God'*, inter alia. Understanding of the subject as presented here presupposes a certain level of knowledge about the Syrian civil war and Hezbollah, since reviewing and displaying all the context cannot be mission of this short paper.

to express suchlike. Therefore the following analysis is based on the few available scientific papers on the issue of Hezbollah's physical involvement in the current Syrian civil war and chosen primary sources like newspaper articles and related resources.

3. Hezbollah's military involvement in the Syrian civil war

On 25 May 2013 Hassan Nasrallah, Secretary General of Lebanese Hezbollah, openly acknowledged the military involvement of his party in the Syrian civil war alongside Syrian military and paramilitary forces (McDonnell/Bulos 2013). He called Syria the „backbone of the resistance“ and it „cannot stand with folded hands while its backbone is being broken.“ Hezbollah is part of the so-called Axis of Resistance against Israel and the West, an Iran-led alliance of the Syrian al-Assad regime and recently also Iraqi Shi'a militias. The alliance shares support and regional objectives, and Iran provides material, financial, training and logistical assistance². The erupted civil war in Syria, initiated by civil uprisings starting in March 2011, constitute a serious threat to this strategic alliance and its members: Iran cannot risk losing its most important ally in the Levant, with Israel in its reach, and Hezbollah has to uphold Syria as a channel for the supply of weapons, equipment and money from the Iranian and Syrian governments and as „safe haven“ for training camps and weapons storage (Sullivan 2014: 9ff.).

Hezbollah has been the most effective (WHITE 14) force on the Syrian battleground and assistant in the survival of the al-Assad regime. In May 2013 Syrian President Bashar al-Assad expressed his „satisfaction and great gratitude“ for Hezbollah's support (AFP 2013). At first, Hezbollah's forces in Syria just held training and combat advisory roles³ but later on they started to reinforce allied Shi'a

² According to the US Department of Defense (2010: 8), Iran supplied Hezbollah with \$100-200 million each year, and Iran and Syria strongly rearmed the group after its war with Israel in 2006 (Rotella 2008).

³ Since the beginning of the uprisings in 2011, Hezbollah directly trained Syrian government personnel and cooperated with the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps – Quds Forces (State Department 2012).

forces with special forces⁴ and to conduct direct combat operations and large-scale offensives in key battles such as al-Qusayr and al-Qalamoun close to the border, as well as further inside Syria in Aleppo and Deraa (White 2014: 14ff., Sullivan 2014: 13). Its forces, which gained combat experience fighting Israel, complemented the Syrian army with their greenness in fighting in urban environments (Sullivan 2014: 9). They are often far better trained than their Iraqi or Syrian counterparts and thereby improve combat effectiveness (ibid.: 23).

Accurate assessments of Hezbollah's presence in numbers are difficult due to the degree of secrecy and the fact, that the group is rotating its fighters in different intervals. Nevertheless it is likely that there were between 3,000 and 5,000 fighters deployed in Syria⁵ (Smyth 2013).

Sullivan (2014: 10) points out three broad objectives of Hezbollah for its armed involvement in the neighbouring civil war: First, it seeks to preserve the Axis of Resistance by keeping up the military capabilities of Assad and intervening directly in combat. Second, it tries to retain the access to Iranian and Syrian material support through protecting the lines of communication from Damascus to Lebanon from rebel interference. Third, Hezbollah seeks to prevent an emergence of a Sunni-dominated regime in Syria if al-Assad should fall.

Nasrallah framed the fight in Syria not just as extension of the resistance, but also rendered the conflict as a sectarian one, fought against the „takfiri threat“ (Sullivan 2014: 14), and positioned forces in defense of Shi'a religious sites in Syria (NOW 2014). He argued, Syria's allies „will not let Syria fall into the hands of America, Israel or takfiri groups“ (Back/Roberts 2013), because for Hezbollah, Syria has now turned into a question of survival and identity (Bahout 2014: 4).

⁴ A Lebanese publication claimed, Hezbollah's Unit 910, an elite commando force, was conducting clandestine operations in the fights over al-Qusayr and Homs among other cities (Heras 2012).

⁵ Estimations are still relatively imprecise, mainly due to three characteristics of Hezbollah's combat tactics: The group trained Alawite and Shi'a militia forces that now fight under Hezbollah's flag; it fought together with Iraqi Shi'a militias and Syrian regime forces for support and advise; and it is rotating its fighters in and out of Syria (White 2014: 14).

4. Ramifications of Hezbollah's involvement in Syria

The following part analyses the implications of Hezbollah's armed involvement in the Syrian civil war, asking for the effects on the party itself, and then, the impact on Lebanese society and Hezbollah's allies and opponents.

4.1 Internal effects on Hezbollah

Hezbollah's forces are already experienced in unconventional and urban warfare as well as light infantry (Sullivan 2014: 14). With its fight in Syria, members of the party were able to acquire different warfare skills than the combat experience gained by fighting Israel. In the battle for al-Qusayr in April 2013, Hezbollah fighters reportedly operated some of the regime's weapon systems, Syrian T-55 and T-54 tanks as well as artillery systems and anti-tank missiles (Nakhoul 2013).

The troops experienced „urban and rural fighting over long distances on multiple fronts“, something by that day unique in the party's combat history, as well as the unexampled involvement in complex coalition warfare (White 2014: 17).

On the battlefield in Syria the Party's deployed younger, post-2006 generation of recruits gains first combat experience (Blanford 2013), so the party is raising leaders, who have already witnessed armed conflict.

Additionally to direct combat experience the group's commanders also exercise intelligence operations (Harel 2013). The group's intimate understanding of south Lebanon is not helping its forces in the unknown terrain of militarily underdeveloped Syria, hence it requires to adapt to the new environment. The party's troops thereby undergo a certain learning process over times, what we might call *skill evolution*:

Hezbollah's forces train military strategy thinking and the conduction of complex combat missions⁶. It replaced tactical battles with offensive operations, following a grander strategy. It practiced planning, command and control⁷, and logistics (White 2014: 17f.).

Those newly obtained capabilities could allow the party important advantages regarding its power position within Lebanese society and confronting neighbouring Israel. Today's Hezbollah is already considered to be stronger than the Lebanese Armed Forces (Barnard 2013) and the experiences from Syria could foster its position.

White (2014: 14ff.) notices however, Hezbollah gains „valuable knowledge of irregular warfare and actual combat experience“, nevertheless this will be of limited relevance in a future conflict with Israel, because of the immense imbalance of power and resources. In Syria, Hezbollah enjoys regime firepower, a secure base area and extensive logistics, advantages that would be on the side of the IDF in a war with Israel.

Still, even if those skills do not help overcoming the gap of asymmetry with Israel, they probably contribute to maintaining the predominance of Hezbollah in Lebanese politics and the containment of other irregular groups inside the country.

The involvement in the Syrian civil war invigorates the group as well as it debilitates it. This could give its enemies the rare opportunity to strike back with significant impact, exploiting the *severe wounds* Hezbollah attained in Syria. This could be the best opportunity in recent years for the group's opponents like the Israeli Defense Forces to launch a war against the weakened group (Ghaddar 2014).

The military support for the Assad regime also resulted in the opening of another front, apart from neighbouring Syria and the southern borders with Israel: Lebanon's heartland and core, Beirut and Bekaa Valley, when Sunni radicals committed suicide bombings end of June (Nassar/Gittens 2014,

⁶ For Hezbollah's tactics in Syria see Haaretz 2014a.

⁷ The war in Syria is training Hezbollah in operation leadership. A Syrian officer in the Presidential guard was quoted, „whenever we are fighting with Hizballah, they take the command and we provide logistics“ (Baker 2013).

BBC 2014, Khraiche 2014).

In August 2014, militants from both extremist groups attacked the northern Lebanese city of Aarsal and captured more than 20 policemen and soldiers, who they threatened to execute, if Hezbollah would not withdraw from Syria (Daily Star 2014b). In October Jabhat al-Nusra carried out a series of offensives in the Bekaa Valley, killed members of Hezbollah and published video footage of their defeat. Thereupon Hezbollah pressured web sites to remove the video (Moukalled 2014) and set off bombs in a southern border town, injuring two Israeli soldiers, to show it is still capable to confront Israel despite its involvement in Syria (Naylor 2014). According to Hanin Ghaddar (2014), Hezbollah's „unshaken image of possessing an omnipotent, undefeatable military has been embarrassingly shattered ... the sacred narrative is falling apart“ for the first time in three years.

Al Arabiya (2014) cites pro-opposition Siraj Press, that Iran is working to unite Shi'a foreign forces in Syria to create a parallel army for a long-term presence even after Assad is gone. This mirrored Hezbollah could defuse some stresses of the Lebanese *Party of God* or, on the contrary, fortify its role in Syria⁸.

The price the group pays for its involvement is high. With increasing numbers of killed Hezbollah fighters in Syria⁹ the demand for enlisting new troops grows and forces the party to lower its recruitment age¹⁰. This only boosts the scepticism within its supporters. Many of its own followers have begun to express doubts about getting further involved in the neighbor's war. Hisham Jaber, a retired Lebanese army general, indicated, southern Shiites, who don't have as many family ties to Syria like their co-believers in the Bekaa, started questioning the party's fight against fellow Arab Muslims (Dettmer 2013). Shiite Nadim Koteich commented in his satirical TV show DNA, „either the fighters have lost Palestine on the map and think it is in Syria, or they were informed that the

⁸ It is to be noted, that till today an article and another article of the Israeli *Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs* (see Segall/Shapira 2014)

⁹ The numbers range from 600 (SOHR 2014) to 1,000 (Issacharoff 2014) dead Hezbollah fighters in Syria. For an armed group investing significant resources into the training of its forces from a small Shi'a community, this is a serious amount (Slim 2014: 67).

¹⁰ Naylor (2014) is writing about „funerals for fighters as young as 16“.

road to Jerusalem runs through Qusayr and Homs“ (Birke 2013).

This internal discourse could possibly lead to a division of the party’s base, especially with the lacking appreciation of families of martyrs, who joined a resistance movement but died in a geopolitical battle for strategic reasons¹¹. It will be interesting to keep an eye on the internal developments of the group, to observe a conceivably shift in stances.

Lebanese society is aware, that the armed forces are the ones holding the primary line of defense along the border and are the only institution capable of maintaining civil peace. This, according to Young (2014), could strengthen the public criticism of the party’s refusal to disarm and thereby take away the interpretation of Hezbollah as a legitimate and essential group of resistance.

On an academic level, Hezbollah’s involvement in Syria could have changed some classifications of the group as an armed non-state actor. With intervening in the Syrian battle front, the group has now reached a transnational character¹².

Furthermore, Hezbollah mainly considers itself to be the leading group of the resistance against Israel but with the intervention in Syria the rhetoric tables have turned. In those areas, where the party supported regime forces to regain territory „Hizb Allah is the ‚occupier‘ and faces armed ‚resistance““ (White 2014: 17)¹³. In Syria, they are fighting in a cause different from its *raison d’être*, the resistance (White 2014: 14).

¹¹ Moreover, this adds a financial burden to the losses. Ely Karmon, senior researcher at the International Institute for Counterterrorism in Israel, told the Times, “every man killed in Syria gives Hezbollah one more families to support“ (Haaretz 2014b).

¹² Fernando Reinares (in ISSCM 2008: 71) defines transnational terrorism, as a a type of terrorism „in one way or another [crossing] state borders, essentially because those who perpetrate it maintain organizational structures or carry out violent activities in more than one country“. Debating the nomination of Hezbollah, as resistance, terrorist, or political group, is not goal of this essay, but it is clear, that the group is not just a legitimate Lebanese political party, but also an armed non-state actor (NSA), a NSA being „any organised group with a basic structure of command operating outside state control that uses force to achieve its political or allegedly political objectives“ (DCAF 2014: 7).

¹³ For further research it would be interesting to discuss how Hezbollah’s ‘status’ and self-perception changed with military involvement in Syria, reinterpreting conventional combat on foreign land as struggle for the survival of resistance.

4.2 Effects on Lebanese society and Hezbollah's external dimension

“In intervening in Syria to save the Assad regime, Hezbollah has made Lebanon a battleground for Syrians and Gulf-supported Salafist-jihadist groups“

– Andrew J. Tabler (2014).

The effects of Hezbollah's involvement go beyond developments inside the group. The group's expansion of operation areas polarized already tensed Shi'a-Sunni relations in the country. Bahout (2014: 3f.) points out, the conflict could “transform the Lebanese sectarian struggle from a primarily 'political' one to an increasingly and notably more 'religious' conflict“ and intertwine Lebanon's political equilibrium with Syria's.

After almost four years of fighting, the conflict reached a point of no return. Lebanese Shiites assume, they would be the first victim of a Sunni revenge, if Assad falls, and as far as the Sunnis are concerned, they see that only Assad's doom can free them (Bahout 2014: 4f.).

In October 2014, supporters of the Islamic State attacked army outposts in Tripoli, northern Lebanon, and the government retaliated with a massive offensive on the Sunni district Bab al-Tabbaneh and islamists hiding in the souq (Van Tets 2014).

The support for al-Qaeda linked radical groups increased in Palestinian camps, like Ain al-Hilweh, where members of Sunni militias refuge from authorities (Ghanem 2014) and contribute to the growing sectarian hostilities.

Army general Qahwaji seeked to please Hezbollah and its Syrian allies by subsuming his actions under the banner of the *War on Terror*, fighting Sunni networks (or *jihadi takfiris*) in the north, which increased the alienation of parts of the Sunni population to the armed forces (see Bahout 2014: 6).

Furthermore, tensions between Hezbollah and the Council of the Gulf Cooperation increased on account of the party's interference (Elakawi 2014) and relations between Hezbollah and Hamas, a major ally in the fight against Israel, strained following the battle of al-Qusayr (Cafiero/Certo 2014). In response to the threat coming from Sunni militants in Syria, Hezbollah increased training and arms distribution for Shiite and Christian villages at the border and some villages organized their own defenses (Ghaddar 2014). This rearmament of society, concurring with increasing polarization, might easily trigger a new tremendous conflict like the Lebanese civil war 1975 to 1990.

Additionally the Syrian refugee crisis is straining the country. By the end of 2014, a third of Lebanon's population will consist of Syrians (Daily Star 2014a), many of whom fled the country over the ongoing conflict and feel antipathy against Hezbollah, since the group is supporting the Syrian regime. This fact, linked with the dissatisfaction of many of the one million Sunni Lebanese, might be an ingredient boiling a future insurgency against government and Hezbollah forces.

Hezbollah has been, at least since the war with Israel in 2006, an admired and well respected group among large parts of the region, also by Christians and Sunnis. Now, it is beginning to look like party for Shiites only (Birke 2013). The aligning with al-Assad and now the interference in Syria is beginning to harm the party's reputation¹⁴.

Hassan Nasrallah himself remarked in an interview with Al-Safir, "the military intervention increased controversy on our stance. In fact, the military intervention was a detail; however the problem with us was in the political stance" (Al-Ahed 2014).

According to the Times, some Sunnis are even calling the Hezbollah „party of Satan“ (Haaretz 2014b). Tabler (2014) warns, the "security vacuum" caused by an instable Lebanese government could "fan the flames into a wider regional conflict", which neither Hezbollah, nor Iran could control or afford.

¹⁴ A member of Hezbollah told Sarah Birke (2013), the party knows the costs, but cannot afford losing Assad: „It's as if a well-dressed, beautiful woman were dumped into a river with a photographer there. She wouldn't worry about how she looked“.

Hezbollah now has to weigh up the possibility to pull out of Syria, even if it means losing the Syrian channel to Iran, as long as it is still possible and before a further escalation can damage the party severely. For Hezbollah's and Iran's leadership, the time might have come, to think about an alternative to al-Assad.

5. Conclusion

This paper tried to analyse the effects of Hezbollah's military intervention in Syria on the party and its environment. It is not safe to say, if Hezbollah's interference in Syria is boosting or weakening the party's position. The group is attaining many casualties, given its small size. The war in Syria is consuming a lot of resources, which are not available for the stand against Israel.

On the other hand, its forces are practicing new command and combat types and leave Syria better trained and with new and unique abilities. A future confrontation with Israel could move on a different level, especially considering the chance, with a fall of al-Assad, the regime's weapons could somehow be brought into Hezbollah's zone of influence, or even directly in Lebanon's southern areas.

With its contribution, the party preserves the regime of president Bashar al-Assad from defeat and maintains the continuing war, which costed more than 190'000¹⁵ human lives.

In conclusion, Hezbollah's involvement is a double-sided sword for the group and a destabilizing factor for Lebanon. While the party needs to maintain the al-Assad regime as a link to its patron Iran, sectarian tensions grow and affect civilian life, also in Hezbollah strongholds .

In June 2014, Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah stated, Hezbollah is willing to "sacrifice for Iraq five times as much as we sacrificed in Syria ... We will be where we are needed" (Leigh 2014). This implies, the party might consider opening another front, protecting the destruction of Shi'a holy places and containing the spread of Sunni militants. If so, this development could drive the party

¹⁵ 191'000 dead is an official U.N. estimation from August this year (Smith-Spark 2014), opposition estimations are much higher.

even further in the vicious circle of sectarian struggle and signify a weakening to heavy to withstand its enemies. Although the party still enjoys a very broad support, increasing interference in struggles of the region can quickly spoil the group's reassuring substructure and foster escalation.

Hence, it will be important to follow upcoming developments concerning this issue. Nevertheless, there stays a need for future research, in particular on the planned establishment of an Iran-backed Syrian Hezbollah.

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