

HIZBALLAH'S INVOLVEMENT IN THE SYRIAN CONFLICT

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Abstract

The main aim of the article is to present Hizballah's involvement in the war in Syria. The author explains why Hizballah is an ardent supporter of Bashar al-Assad's regime and tries to define the motivations behind Hizballah's military engagement and current position in Syria. In this paper the author also seeks to explain the dilemmas surrounding Hizballah's involvement in Syrian war.

Key words: *Hizballah, Hassan Nasrallah, Bashar al-Assad, War in Syria.*

INTRODUCTION

Hizballah (The Party of God) was founded in 1982 in the Bekaa Valley with the involvement of the Iranian Revolutionary Corps (*pasdaran*). In the beginning, The Party of God (a name officially adopted in 1985) existed not as a coherent organization, but as a loosely-connected group of young Shia radicals, mostly associated with Islamic AMAL (a splinter group of AMAL – Afwaj Muqawama Lubnaniyya). The founding of Hizballah was directly connected with four main factors: the Shia revival in Lebanon in the 1970's, led by Imam Musa Sadr; the Islamic revolution in Iran, which transformed Iran into an Islamic Republic; the outbreak of a sectarian civil war in Lebanon, consolidating divisions in Lebanese society; and the Israeli invasion of Lebanon as part of the 'Peace for Galilee' operation.

In the 1980's, the Party of God was a small military organization dependent on Iranian support. Hizballah had carried out many suicide attacks and was deeply involved in kidnappings. In 1983, the organization was responsible for the bombings of U.S. and French military barracks, resulting in heavy losses of French and American soldiers. Under the direction of the Iranian authorities, the Party of God kidnapped U.S., British, French and West German citizens. Some of the

hostages spent many years in Hizballah captivity, such as American journalist Terry Anderson, who was released after six years of captivity. These 'activities' led Hizballah to be labeled as a terrorist organization; even though the organization has changed its profile over the decades, it has proven difficult to perceive them as non-terrorist group.

When the war in Lebanon ended, Hizballah developed itself as a political party and participated in the first post-war parliamentary elections. However, the organization still maintained its military wing – the Islamic Resistance. Since the 1990's, Hizballah has built its position in Lebanese politics and has become one of the most influential political parties in the country. After parliamentary elections in 2005, Hizballah for the first time in its history obtained ministerial portfolios in the government. Mohammed Fneish became the Minister of Energy and Trad Hamadeh received the position of the Minister of Labour. Both resigned in 2006 during the political crisis.

1. HIZBALLAH-SYRIAN RELATIONS

Although Iran participated in founding of Hizballah, which became an extensive tool in its foreign policy, Syria would not have allowed itself to lose control over Lebanese politics during the civil war. After some time, relations between Syria and the 'Party of God' seriously deteriorated due to the hostage crisis. President Hafez al-Assad appealed to Iranian ayatollahs to release kidnapped U.S. military officer William R. Higgins, and when the Iranians declined, he decided to intensify the internal conflict among the Shia and use the secular AMAL against Hizballah. The conflict got under control after Iran and Syria reached an agreement in Damascus in January 1989, by which Syria accepted the Hizballah presence in South Lebanon and restricted the Party of God from arbitrary operations against Israel [Osoegawa 2013: 47]. Ever since then, Syria has had direct influence on Hizballah activity, with Iranian approval.

A few months later in Taif, Saudi Arabia, under the aegis of the Syrian regime, Lebanese parliamentarians (those elected before the war) negotiated a treaty to establish the post-war order in Lebanon. The agreement covered many political issues, including amendments to the Lebanese Constitution, and was also the basis for the special relationship between Lebanon and Syria. Consequently, in 1991, Syria and Lebanon signed the "Treaty of Brotherhood, Cooperation and Coordination," which officially confirmed Syrian hegemony over the state of Lebanon [Azani 2009: 187]. It enabled the Hafez al-Assad regime to tighten control over political and religious groups in Lebanon, including Hizballah. However, in the 90's, the Party of God tried to act more independently, participating in regular clashes with Israel in 1993 and in 1996. The Syrian regime the forced the Party of God to keep to the imposed restrictions [Ibid.: 187].

In the year 2000, a new chapter in mutual relations came into being. In May, Israeli troops withdrew from South Lebanon, simultaneously liquidating the Buffer Zone established in 1985. Then, in June, Hafez al-Assad died and his son Bashar al-Assad began to rule Syria. To deal with the new situation, Hizballah quickly responded to the Israeli withdrawal, which it considered incomplete. According to Party of God leadership, a small piece of land known as Shebaa Farms remained

under occupation, and therefore they declared that they would maintain their military wing and vowed that the Islamic Resistance would continue the struggle against Israel [Hamzeh 2004: 96]. On many occasions, Hizballah maintained their undeniable right to fight for Sheeba Farms as a part of Lebanese territory [Alagha 2011: 121]. On the contrary, many leaders who opposed the Party of God, such as the Druze politician Walid Jumblatt, perceived Hizballah's stance on Shebaa Farms as a pretext not to disarm itself [The Struggle for Lebanese Independence 2006].

After death of his father, Bashar al-Assad maintained close relations with Hizballah. He even enhanced Hizballah's political status by cordially hosting Nasrallah in Syria and supplying the Party of God with more advanced weaponry [Rabil 2007: 43-51]. Nasrallah always respected Bashar al-Assad and was aware of his role played in preserving the status quo for Hizballah.

Both Syria and Hizballah ran into trouble after the killing of the former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri in February 2005 and the subsequently outbreak of the Cedar Revolution. Demonstrators encroached on the Syrian military presence in Lebanon and blamed the Syrian regime and Hizballah for killing Hariri. Consequently, Syrian troops left Lebanon after 29 years there, ending the era of Syrian military domination of Lebanon. In the beginning, the realities of Lebanese politics made it difficult to commence an investigation into Hariri's assassination. Then, the UN Security Council established the International Independent Investigative Commission (IIIC) which was responsible for collecting all information and documents regarding the assassination. IIIC Chairman and prosecutor Detlev Mehlis had four suspects arrested on suspicion of involvement in Hariri's death, all of them high-ranking Lebanese intelligence officers. In December 2005, the Prime Minister Fouad Siniora sent a letter to UN Secretary General Kofi Anan in which he requested the establishment of an international tribunal to resolve the issue of Hariri's death [Ożarowski 2015: 332].

Hizballah became the primary opponent of the Special Tribunal for Lebanon (STL) – an international court established to conduct an investigation and to charge those persons responsible for the killing of Rafik Hariri and 22 others in a bombing. Hizballah considered STL as foreign imposition upon Lebanon and as foreign interference in Lebanese internal affairs. In his statements and speeches, Nasrallah repeated that STL was part of the battle between Hizballah and the resistance axis (Syria and Iran) and Israel [Slim 2010].

2. THE OUTBREAK OF REVOLUTION IN SYRIA AND THE ROLE OF HIZBALLAH

The “Arab Spring” is a phenomenon which researchers around the world have still being analyzing. It began in 2010 in Tunisia with the self-immolation of Mohamed Bouazizi. The act sparked demonstrations in Tunisia against the regime of Ben Ali. The Arab revolution in Tunisia then spread to other Arab states. Similar incidents occurred in Egypt, Yemen, Libya and Bahrain. Everywhere, except for Bahrain, the revolutionaries achieved their primary aims and forced their national leaders to step down. The events in Syria might have had the same results, but they did not. No one knew that the beginning of revolutionary activities in Syria would spark a long-lasting and exhausting war that would be one of the biggest dilemmas in the contemporary Middle East.

Protests started in March 2011 in the city of Deraa after a group of teenagers painted revolutionary slogans on a wall and were sent to jail as a result. The people of Deraa went into the streets in defense of the schoolboys and were met with a violent reaction from the security forces which in turn sparked nationwide protests against the al-Assad regime. The conflict escalated and turned into a civil war. At present, there is no simple division between the al-Assad regime forces and the rebels. The founding of the Islamic State and engagement of outside powers have made this war more complex and multi-dimensional. To date, over 220,000 people have been killed in the conflict [Syria: the story of the conflict 2015].

Unlike in other states where revolutionaries have overthrown national leaders, Hizballah has never condemned its Syrian ally Bashar al-Assad. Due to their mutual political and strategic interests, the Party of God has had no choice but to support Assad's regime. As Marisa Sullivan writes, Syria "has played a vital role in the transfer of weapons, equipment, and money from Iran to Hizballah", and the "Assad regime has provided safe haven for Hizballah training camps and weapons storage" [Sullivan 2014: 10]. Therefore, Assad's Syria has been a crucial ally for Hizballah.

Motivated by such, the Party of God participated in clashes and battles during the first phase of the war; however, Hizballah has refrained from commenting on its engagement in Syria. They have quietly held funerals for members killed in the conflict, and even after the funerals of Musa Ali Shehimi and high-ranking commander Ali Nassif, Nasrallah stated that he was killed in a Syrian border area inhabited by Lebanese people who were subjected to rebel bombardment [Khraiche 2012]. Additionally, the Hizballah leader said that those Lebanese residents killed in Syria had acted on their own behalves, with no connection to Hizballah [Ibid.].

Why did Hizballah hide its involvement in the Syrian Civil War? First, they usually deny any involvement until it becomes obvious and undeniable. It is Hizballah's fundamental strategy to mislead in order to foment information chaos. Second, in this case, Hizballah wanted to avoid a situation in which official information about its involvement in the Syrian conflict might have led to an outbreak of hostilities in Lebanon.

Therefore, in the 2011 and 2012, Hizballah military forces engagement in the Syrian war was limited. However, the al-Assad regime desperately needed Hizballah's well-trained special forces, which were experienced in urban warfare. The Syrian army was dominated by heavy artillery, and was lacking in such unites. Therefore, it pushed Hizballah into deeper involvement in the war in Syria.

3. HIZBALLAH FIGHTS IN SYRIA'S WAR

Some sources have reported that the estimated number of Hizballah fighters in Syria was around 10,000. That is unlikely, and to date the reasonable estimate is around 4,000 – 5,000 [White 2014: 15]. It is significant, however, that Hizballah regularly rotates its troops so that fighters may to recuperate and maintain a high level of combat-readiness.

As Jeffrey White mentions, there is not enough information about the organization of Hizballah forces in Syria; however, there seem to be four aspects to the Party of God's mission: training regime forces; providing combat advisors; "corseting"

operations in which Hizballah reinforces another units of lower quality; and direct military operations [Ibid.:16].

The full involvement of Hizballah emerged in the battle of al-Qusayr, which started 19 May 2013, almost three weeks after Nasrallah officially admitted to Hizballah's combat presence in Syria. The al-Assad regime and its allies decided to recapture [Blanford 2012: 18] the town of al-Qusayr, which was of strategic value to rebels due to its location along an important supply route.

First, in April 2013, Syrian regime forces and Hizballah successfully seized the small villages located around the city of al-Qusayr. After that, they conquered al-Qusayr within 17 days. Among the pro-regime forces were 1,200-1,700 Hizballah fighters, who played a special role in fighting the rebels in al-Qusayr. First, Hizballah's troops spearheaded the strike on the city, using their special forces experience to fight for every centimeter of the land and every building in the close, urban environment. The support of Syrian regime artillery helped to break down the resistance of the rebel combat groups and take control over the city [Ibid. 19-21].

Despite the victory Hizballah, suffered heavy losses. Estimated casualties range between 60-120 dead [Levitt, Zelin 2013: 17; Blanford 2012: 21]¹. After taking al-Qusayr, Nasrallah stated that Hizballah was aware of the costs of combat engagement in the Syrian war, and would continue its mission in the conflict. Furthermore, he added that Hizballah's position both before and after the battle of al-Qusayr were the same, and also announced further engagement in the Syrian war [Hezbollah leader vows to continue Syria fight 2013].

In 2014, Hizballah took a fixed position and refrained from taking part in direct combat as in al-Qusayr. It is likely that the heavy losses in the battle of al-Qusayr forced Hizballah's leadership to redefine its strategy Syria to some extent. However, Hizballah fighters, acting as reinforcements, took part in offensive in the Qalamoun Mountains, seizing the city of Yabroud and participating in combat around Damascus and the international airport [Beck 2015].

In March 2015, combat was concentrated to the south of Damascus and on the edge of the Golan Heights. The rebel Free Syrian Army, backed up by Sunni Jihadi groups (some affiliated with al-Qaeda) took up an offensive that was met with a counterattack by Syrian regime troops and Hizballah forces assisted by Iranian commanders [Syrian troops launch...2015].

The area between the south of Damascus and the Golan Heights is considered strategically valuable due to its proximity to the Israeli border, the Jordan River and the Daraa-Damascus highway, a significant logistical supply route [Luck 2015]. To date, combat remains underway in the Qalamoun area, in which Hizballah has begun preparations to fortify the villages it controls in Syrian and Lebanese territory in order to resist attack and subsequently recapture the entire Qalamoun area [Report: Hizballah Freezing Internal Affairs until Qalamoun Battle Ends 2015].

Hizballah was also involved in a battle of Aleppo. Since 2013, Hizballah fighters have been present near Aleppo and in June 2013 participated in operation "Northern Storm". Before the operation began, Hizballah fighters played a

¹ M. Levitt and A. Y Zelin quoted G. Cohen and provide information about at least 60 Hizballah's men killed in the battle of al-Qusayr. N. Blanford, basing on Intelligence papers pointed that Hizballah lost between 70-120 men.

significant role in taking positions in the surrounding small towns, Nebul and Zahra. From a strategic point of view, these cities were very important. Firstly, their location made them important staging grounds for launching an attack on Aleppo. Secondly, the towns were strategically located near the highway between Aleppo and Minnakh Airbase, a route used to supply the forces engaged in war. Lastly, control of these cities strengthened the position at Minnakh Airbase from which air raids on rebel positions could be launched [Durfee, McCormick, Peisch 2013]. In 2014, regime forces (including Hizballah) continued the siege of Aleppo. In 2015, Hizballah participated in an offensive in which regime forces captured 408 square kilometers of territory in southern Aleppo. Hizballah played a pivotal role in this offensive. Hizballah fighters captured several villages and helped the regime Syrian Army to pave the southern approach to Aleppo [Fadel 2015]. Finally, Hizballah took part in the siege of Aleppo in 2016, as a result of which regime forces captured the city.

4. DILEMMAS AROUND HIZBALLAH'S INVOLVEMENT IN SYRIAN WAR

To date, Hizballah has unquestionably been an important player in the Syrian conflict. Despite its losses, the Party of God's involvement in Syria has brought some gains. Firstly, Hizballah fighters gained experience and had the opportunity to test various combat strategies outside of their home environment. From the outbreak of war, Hizballah provided support in the form of light infantry and snipers; later, however, its forced fulfilled combat and reinforcement roles. Hizballah leadership have acquainted themselves with the capabilities of their military units and the extent to which they can engage available forces. The combat experience gained by Hizballah forced may be invaluable in any future wars with Israel or non-state militarized groups. Since the "July War" with Israel in 2006, Hizballah has not taken part in such operations, and for this reason, military involvement in Syria was the one of the greatest challenges the organization has taken up.

Secondly, Hizballah's involvement in the Syrian war and its defense of Bashar al-Assad made up its existential aim. Nasrallah and the whole leadership of the Party of God are aware of how crucial an ally Syria is, and how important is to do as much as possible to maintain the al-Assad regime in Syria. The regime's downfall would undermine Hizballah's strong position in Lebanon – sustained Syrian 'patronage' – and cut off their primary supply of weapons. It would diminish the role of Hizballah in its resistance (*moqawama*) policy against Israel. Therefore, it is clear how important it is for Hizballah to defend the al-Assad regime in the neighboring state.

Thirdly, Hizballah, which is strongly linked with Iran, serves overall Iranian interests in Syria and forms a link in the Iran-Syria-Hizballah axis. Taking into consideration the downfall of al-Assad's regime, neither Iran nor Hizballah would allow itself to lose the Syrian link, which would collapse the axis of common interests and interdependence. For that reason, Hizballah's involvement in Syria sets up a clear division between pro-Assad forces and its allies including Iran, and anti-Assad rebels, Sunni jihadists and the Western world lead by the U.S.

Over the course of the war in Syria, Hizballah has tightened its cooperation with Russia. Having common enemies enabled the two parties to commence military coordination. Before the siege of Aleppo in 2016, there was an unofficial meeting between Russian and Hizballah officials. The aim of this meeting was to establish “continual” communication and shared channels between two sides with regards to the battleground in Aleppo. The two sides also discussed mutual future plans [Lieber 2016]. For Hizballah, this was a chance to be among the decision-makers on Syrian issues. In cooperation with Russia, Hizballah became a reliable military “partner,” not just an entity of little importance used as a back-up in military campaigns. When considering further decision on the Syrian conflict, Hizballah, thanks to its connections with Iran and Russia, may have the opportunity to secure its position in Syria and thus strengthen its position in Lebanon. This was the main goal which led Hizballah to engage in the Syrian war.

After almost six years of an exhausting war in Syria there are no clear signs that the conflict may end in the near future. The complexity of the interests of the various combatants – as well as the interests of outside powers who care only for their own political goals - leads to the conclusion that Syria has become a political training ground with real combat.

Hizballah still plays a significant role in the Syrian war, as for the Party of God it is not only a war for the survival of the al-Assad regime, but for the existence of Hizballah itself. Therefore, Hizballah is forced to fight alongside Syrian forces “to the last man”. This explains why Hizballah’s involvement has hitherto been so intensive.

In 2016, the al-Assad forces and their allies achieved military supremacy, mainly thanks to Russian engagement. After capturing Aleppo, Hizballah, as an ally of the al-Assad regime, strengthened its position in Syria and also in Lebanon. Currently, there is no clear danger that al-Assad regime might fall, meaning that Hizballah is more comfortable in its activities. Hizballah has its secured Syrian shield, allowing the party to maintain the status quo as part of the Iran-Syria-Hizballah axis and maintain its military potential in relation to Israel. Last year, Hizballah also initiated closer cooperation with Russia in battlefield operations. This may be seen as a remarkable occurrence which can significantly strengthen the position of Hizballah.

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