



The Impact of the Syrian Crisis on Lebanon. Local and Regional Rationales for Hezbollah's Involvement in Syria

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Abstract

Since the beginning of the conflict, Syria has been the playground for several actors, such as Qatar, Saudi Arabia or Iran, defending their domestic interests or fighting for regional influence. The conflict entered a new phase in June 2013 with the direct involvement of Hezbollah, which sent troops to help al-Assad's regime fighting the armed insurrection. This event has had significant repercussions not only for the Syrian conflict itself but also for Lebanon. The aim of this paper is to shed light on the reasons that have led Hezbollah to engage openly in the Syrian conflict and what the consequences of such a decision could be, both for the country's and the party's future. The author argues that the party's involvement in the conflict is primarily a primordial necessity as the current Syrian regime is one of Hezbollah's strongest allies in the region without being a vital one. Thus the loss of the Syrian regime has the potential to pose new difficulties to the movement but would not necessarily imply its destruction.

Keywords: *Lebanon / Hezbollah / Syrian conflict / Iran*

The Impact of the Syrian Crisis on Lebanon. Local and Regional Rationales for Hezbollah's Involvement in Syria

by Charles-Brian Biondi*

Introduction

Since the beginning of the conflict, the Syrian crisis has witnessed several turnarounds. What started as a movement of peaceful opposition to the regime rapidly turned into an armed rebellion, while also acquiring a regional and an international dimension. Today the Syrian conflict constitutes one of the biggest challenges for the international community. Indeed, the international community is deeply divided and two blocks have been opposing each other, while defending their interests and striving for regional influence. One block is led by Western countries, Turkey and their Gulf partners (i.e. Saudi Arabia and Qatar), and is calling for the fall of the al-Assad regime. The other side, led by Russia, China and Iran, still considers al-Assad as the legitimate leader and insists on a status quo oriented resolution, which would allow the regime to retain effective power.

Over recent months, the conflict has undergone another abrupt change and has entered a new phase, particularly with the direct involvement of Hezbollah in May 2013 on the side of the Syrian regime. The "Party of God" officially sent troops to help al-Assad fight the insurrection.¹ Hezbollah's military involvement in Syria has entailed many losses for the opposition and has allowed the regime to regain control of areas once lost. This development has had significant repercussions not only for the Syrian conflict but also for Lebanon in light of the prominent role of the party in the Lebanese political context. While the situation in Lebanon is still seemingly stable despite some acts of violence that intensified in mid-October 2013,² the already highly polarized society is becoming more and more divided along sectarian lines because of the Syrian conflict and the engagement by all Lebanese parties on one side or another. The fear of a renewal of an internal conflict with confessional overtones in Lebanon is increasingly concrete. On top of that, the risk that the Syrian conflict will lead to a *de facto* erosion of the Lebanese/Syrian border is increasingly real. Indeed, several groups have crossed the border over the last months going to fight in Syria or finding a safe haven in Lebanon. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for

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¹ Hassan Nasrallah explained the role of Hezbollah in Syria on 25 May 2013, in a speech on the occasion of the Resistance and Liberation Day. Video (in Arabic):

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CrWKAHCZUbc>. Full transcript in English:

http://vineyardsaker.blogspot.it/2013/05/speech-of-hezbollah-secretary-general_28.html.

² "Death toll in Lebanon clashes rises to five", in *Al Arabiya*, 25 October 2013,

<http://english.alarabiya.net/en/News/middle-east/2013/10/25/Death-toll-in-Lebanon-clashes-rises-to-five.html>.

Refugees, the number of displaced people within Syria has reached 4.25 million, while those who have sought refuge in neighbouring countries number 2 million.³

Against this backdrop, the aim of this paper is to understand the reasons that have led Hezbollah to engage openly in the Syrian conflict and what the consequences of such a move could be, both for Lebanon and the party's future. It argues that Hezbollah's decision to intervene is highly political and not driven by sectarian motives. As in the case of the broader Syrian conflict, religion, rather than being the principal driver of the conflict, is largely used as a vector of mobilization, loyalty and recruitment. Moreover, Hezbollah's involvement in the conflict is a strategic necessity, albeit not a vital one. Even though the party is strong, the loss of such a close ally as the Syrian regime could pose new difficulties for the movement, although it would not necessarily lead to its downfall.

In this paper we will first describe the regional context of the Syrian conflict in order to seek better understanding. In the second part, the reasons that led Hezbollah to intervene in the Syrian conflict will be examined. Finally, we will focus on the implications of Hezbollah's involvement in Syria.

1. The Syrian conflict and its regional context

Over the last two years, violence and foreign interference have been on the rise in Syria. The involvement of Hezbollah in the conflict in May 2013 constituted a turning point both in the Syrian conflict and in Lebanon's internal situation. Indeed, Hezbollah officially acknowledged that its armed branch was fighting in southwest Syria, supporting the regime's army. Until then, the regime had seen some difficult moments, suffering key defeats against rebel forces,⁴ especially in northern Syria. Hezbollah's intervention allowed the regime to recapture the city of Qusayr,⁵ a strategic location for the opposition. The city, once under the control of jihadist groups,⁶ is a point of transit for arms and other kinds of supplies from Lebanon to Syria. Indeed, since May, the regime's army has won back numerous areas in the country.

Lebanon is beyond any doubt the country most affected by the situation in Syria. The country hosts approximately 1 of the 2 million refugees that fled the conflict, the majority of whom are Sunnis.⁷ Refugees now represent almost 25 percent of the Lebanese population and such an influx raises several difficulties since the Lebanese state does not have either the resources or the capacity to manage such a drastic increase in residents. The country has always suffered from the lack of a functioning

³ UNHCR, *Number of Syrian refugees tops 2 million mark with more on the way*, 3 September 2013, <http://www.unhcr.org/522495669.html>.

⁴ "Syria crisis: Raqqqa governor held by rebels 'as city falls'", in *BBC News*, 5 March 2013, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-21666913>.

⁵ Known as the 2nd battle of Qusayr, 19 May-5 June 2013.

⁶ "Hezbollah's role in Qusayr", in *Press TV*, 25 June 2013, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LlxLpkBw9Rw>.

⁷ International Crisis Group, "Too Close for Comfort: Syrians in Lebanon", in *ICG Middle East Reports*, No. 141 (May 2013), p. 3, <http://www.crisisgroup.org/en/regions/middle-east-north-africa/egypt-syria-lebanon/lebanon/141-too-close-for-comfort-syrians-in-lebanon.aspx>.

central state, strong institutions and a proper, nation-wide security apparatus. In some areas the population has more than doubled (especially in northern Lebanon where 1/3 of the refugees have settled) and the lack of housing and refugee camps has forced thousands of Syrians to live on the streets or in abandoned buildings.⁸ The already weak state services cannot afford to provide for the basic needs of refugees and are starting to have difficulties in offering a minimum level of welfare to Lebanese citizens. Moreover, crime has risen across the country since the beginning of the refugee crisis, and acts of violence and racism against Syrians have increased dramatically too.⁹ This situation increases tensions between the local population and the Syrians who are escaping the Syrian conflict.

Many Syrian fighters have found a safe haven in Lebanon, where anti-al-Assad groups provide them with medicines, arms and other forms of support, especially in the region of Tripoli. The presence of Syrians backed by Lebanese organizations and parties poses new difficulties for the country's internal security and represents a danger for the country's stability. Fights between factions, kidnappings, murders and bomb attacks have undermined the security of Lebanon over the last months. The fear that Lebanon could become the backyard of the Syrian conflict is more and more widespread. The bombings in Tripoli against a Salafi mosque¹⁰ and in a Hezbollah controlled area in a southern suburb of Beirut¹¹ in August 2013 fuelled and reflected these rising concerns. The Syrian conflict has contributed to a deepening of the sectarian divisions that have always constituted one of the defining features of Lebanon's social and political makeup. Indeed, most of the Lebanese parties are divided into two blocks along the Syrian conflict. The pro-al-Assad branch is mainly constituted by the 8th of March movement (which includes Hezbollah), the Amal movement and the Free Patriotic Current of Michel Aoun. The other camp is led by the Future Current of Saad Hariri and includes many other Sunni Parties and Salafi groups or religious personalities such as Sheikh Ahmad al-Aseer.¹² The risk of an open conflict between these different parties is real, and such a situation could plunge the country back into violence.

2. Why did Hezbollah intervene in Syria?

2.1. Historical links and resistance against Israel

Hezbollah was created in 1982 as a result of the fusion of several Shia parties including extremist ones. Hezbollah was created for two main reasons. The first was to give a voice to and protect the Shia community in Lebanon at a time when the country was facing a tremendous civil war. The second reason was to create a strong movement of resistance against Israel in order to free territories at that time occupied in southern Lebanon. Since its creation Hezbollah has established strong ties with the

⁸ Ibidem, p. 5-6.

⁹ Ibidem, p. 4.

¹⁰ "Lebanese city of Tripoli rocked by deadly explosions", in *BBC News*, 23 August 2013, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-23811328>.

¹¹ "Deadly Lebanon blast in Beirut stronghold of Hezbollah", in *BBC News*, 15 August 2013, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-23716271>.

¹² Salafi leader calling the Sunni community to fight against Hezbollah and calling for Jihad in Syria.

Islamic Republic of Iran and has considered Imam Khomeini as an example to follow and the father of its ideology.¹³

With Hezbollah's rise in the region as a bulwark against Israel, the party developed a strong relationship with the Syrian regime, which was led by Hafez al-Assad from 1971 to 2000. These strong links emerged thanks to the similar ideology shared by Hezbollah and the Syrian regime (based on anti-imperialism and resistance to Israel and the West), but also because the Syrian regime saw the opportunity to find a powerful ally inside Lebanon, a country where Syria had always wanted to extend its influence because it was considered as a Syrian province. The historical relationship between the Syrian regime and Hezbollah is an important factor that pushed the movement to intervene in the Syrian civil war. Indeed, the Syrian regime has always been a strong ally and has provided significant assistance in terms of military, financial and political support to the Shia Lebanese party. The official rhetoric espoused by Hezbollah concerning its intervention in Syria underlines the importance of these links.¹⁴ The movement's leader, Hassan Nasrallah, has also pointed to Syria's key role in the fight against Israel, which according to the movement's official narrative constitutes one of the two main reasons why it decided to actively support the regime. Nasrallah stated that the Syrian regime is one of its main regional partners, deeply engaged in the Lebanese resistance and the Palestinian cause. In one of his speeches¹⁵ he pointed out the central role of Syria, not only as a "transit point" for arms from Iran to Hezbollah and Hamas, but also as a pillar of resistance against Israel. Indeed, Hezbollah has built its great reputation in the Arab world thanks to its leading role in the fight against Israel. The victories of the movement in 2000 and in 2006 confirmed this reputation and reinforced Hezbollah's role as the only actor that does not fear Israel and can even inflict heavy losses upon it. The fight against Israel, and resistance against imperialism and the West have always been factors of legitimation in the Arab world. These views reflect both Hezbollah's ideology and that of the Syrian regime. By portraying the al-Assad regime as the main actor pursuing these goals and even as the only Arab state that effectively fights against Israel and supports resistance movements like Hezbollah and Hamas, Hassan Nasrallah has legitimized the Syrian regime. He pointed out that no other Arab state has remained concretely committed to the Palestinian cause and has castigated the Gulf states not so much for upholding Sunni Islam, but rather for their passivity and their tacit opposition to the resistance camp. Hence, while legitimizing al-Assad, Nasrallah has also sought to delegitimize his enemies, i.e. Saudi Arabia and Qatar, by pointing out their alliances with the US and support for its foreign policy, their passivity towards Israel, their selfishness and their opposition to the only Arab state that fights for the interest of the Arab world.

¹³ Alyssa Fetini, "A brief history of Hizballah", in *Time*, 8 June 2009, <http://content.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,1903301,00.html>.

¹⁴ See Hassan Nasrallah's speech delivered on 9 May 2013, on the occasion of the 25th anniversary of the al-Nour Radio Station. Video (in Arabic): <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=leoAV6j7RRw>. Full English voice-over of the speech: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0MxWKTOkW5s>.

¹⁵ *Ibidem*.

2.2. *The fight against takfiryin*

Hezbollah also explains its involvement in Syria by referring to the fight against the *takfiryin*.¹⁶ Nasrallah has denounced the involvement of many foreign actors in Syria and especially the presence of jihadists that found another propitious ground in that conflict-torn country.¹⁷ The movement underlined that its “interference” in Syria’s internal conflict is meant to fight against these jihadist groups, defined as *takfiryin*, which are involved in the conflict for religious purposes. These extremist jihadist groups such as Jabhat al-Nusra (Al-Nusra Front), fight in the name of Sunni Islam and stigmatize others religions as well as Sunnis who do not have the same radical conception of Islam (and are viewed by them as apostates). Proof of their recent violent conduct and disrespect for human rights is plentiful and includes, for example, the beheading of three Christians near Aleppo in June 2013.¹⁸ The “Party of God” claims to defend itself, Lebanon, the Syrian population and all minorities against extremism. The combat that Hezbollah conducts in Syria is not a fight against Sunni Islam but against Jihadists whose will is to impose an Islamic State and a radical conception of Islam. This argument has already been used by al-Assad himself to justify his role as the guarantor of freedom of religion, and the protector of minorities, including Christians. Both Hezbollah and the Syrian regime argue that their fight is not religious in nature, but is meant to defend the population against extremism.

2.3. *A pragmatic decision led by the regional situation*

All these aspects reinforce the idea that Hezbollah’s engagement in Syria is deeply political. The movement’s involvement is pragmatic. As we stated, the Syrian regime is a precious ally for Hezbollah. Not only because of the substantial help provided by the regime and its geographical position between Lebanon and Iran, but also because the Syrian regime is a bulwark against radical Islamism and *Takfirism*. An increase in the influence of these movements in a multi-confessional region can pose a serious threat to the future of both Syria and Lebanon. This fear is widespread amongst Syrians and Lebanese supporters of the al-Assad regime. It is the same fear that pervades Hezbollah and that constitutes a major argument for intervening in Syria.

This said, Hezbollah’s intervention has also come at a cost. The engagement of Hezbollah on the side of the Syrian regime has deeply affected its image across the Arab world. Once seen as a force of “resistance”, the movement is now considered by many Sunnis as a Shia party oppressing the Syrian people and fighting for confessional purposes.

Finally, Hezbollah’s intervention in Syria was also motivated by the internal Lebanese situation. As demonstrated above, the internal situation in Lebanon is more and more worrying. In addition to the substantial influx of refugees, the presence of Syrian

¹⁶ The term “takfiryin” refers to groups of fundamentalists Islamists who accuse others Muslims that do not share their point of view of apostasy.

¹⁷ See Hassan Nasrallah’s speech delivered on 25 May 2013, on the occasion of the Resistance and Liberation Day.

¹⁸ “Horrible video shows Syrian Catholic priest being ‘beheaded by jihadist fighters in front of cheering crowd’”, in *The Daily Mail (UK)*, 1 July 2013, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2352251/Horrific-video-shows-Syrian-Catholic-priest-beheaded-jihadist-fighters-cheering-crowd.html>.

fighters and the fact that the Syrian/Lebanese border has become a zone of intense arm trafficking have increased Hezbollah's insecurity. Hezbollah's leaders are very concerned about the fact that refugee camps could turn into training camps where rebels could recruit other fighters.¹⁹ Indeed, Lebanon has already experienced such a situation with the influx of Palestinian refugees, and the emergence of militant Palestinian groups, which eventually partook in the Lebanese civil war. Syrian refugees, 95 percent of whom are Sunnis and many of whom are anti-al-Assad supporters with a different ideology from Hezbollah's, could represent a threat for the movement. In the last months it has been attacked several times, even in its own territory of Dahiye in the southern suburb of Beirut on 15 August 2013.²⁰ The internal situation in Lebanon therefore also explains Hezbollah's impulse to intervene in Syria in order to fight against those that threaten its hegemony and security in Lebanon.

3. The implications of Hezbollah's involvement

What are the implications of Hezbollah's involvement in Syria? Hezbollah's intervention was beyond any doubt a strategic but not vital necessity. However, it seems pretty clear that in the long term even if the Syrian regime were to survive it would never be as strong as before. No political system can emerge unscathed from over two years of civil war. Today, nobody can predict Syria's political future. The only certainty is that violence and low-intensity combat are foreseen to continue in the coming months and possibly years. Under these conditions, Hezbollah seems to have lost one of its strongest allies anyhow. We can go further by stating that Hezbollah already lost Syria's precious help two years ago. Unlike in the past, when it was dependent on Syria and Iran,²¹ which were actively supporting a drastic increase in its military capacities since its creation, Hezbollah is nowadays one of the most powerful parties in Lebanon and in the whole region. Hezbollah is often described as a "state within the state" with reference to its political, military and financial power added to a strong and effective security and intelligence apparatus. Hezbollah disposes of an army of more than 10,000 men, heavy artillery and different types of missiles. At the military level, it seems that Hezbollah can survive and preserve its strike capacity without Syrian backing.

The situation in Syria has led many to raise the question of Hezbollah's survival. Many have predicted the future dismantling of the movement, or at least seem to bet on a drastic reduction of its military capacities, seeing an opportunity for Israel to get rid of its nearest and probably strongest enemy. Notwithstanding these views, Hezbollah's disappearance is neither for today nor for tomorrow. Concerning its military capabilities, Nasrallah has said publicly that everything that Hezbollah need to conduct a war is already inside Lebanon, and that the movement stands ready to fight against a potential Israeli attack.²² Moreover, concerning its funding, the movement has benefited

¹⁹ International Crisis Group, "Too Close for Comfort: Syrians in Lebanon", cit., p. 21.

²⁰ Thomas El-Basha and Meris Lutz, "Car bomb kills 21 in Beirut southern suburb", in *The Daily Star (Lebanon)*, 15 August 2013, <http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Lebanon-News/2013/Aug-15/227505-explosion-in-southern-suburb-of-beirut-witnesses.ashx>.

²¹ Siemon T. Wezeman et al., "International arms transfers", in *SIPRI Yearbook 2007*, p. 409-411.

²² See Hassan Nasrallah's speech delivered on 16 February 2013, on the occasion of a ceremony in commemoration of Hezbollah's martyred leaders. Video: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fqLwbPkZd_Q.

from supplies from Syria but the main sponsor has always been the Islamic Republic of Iran. The Syrian funds directed to Hezbollah have only represented a small part of the movement's financial resources even if Syria has been an important transit point for Iranian funds. Indeed, the movement receives several million dollars per year from Iran, also thanks to a series of NGOs such as the *Islamic Resistance Support Organization* that operate worldwide. Many illegal ways of funding have been attributed to Hezbollah. The movement is suspected of drug trafficking in order to finance its activities. Thus Hezbollah would control the hashish traffic of the Bekaa Valley in Lebanon and smuggle cocaine from South America, which would constitute one of the main resources for the movement.²³ In addition, an illegal trade in diamonds based in West Africa (Sierra Leone, Senegal), where the Lebanese community is significant, would also benefit the movement.²⁴ Not only is this trafficking highly lucrative, but the Shia movement has also managed to diversify its external supplies by combining legal and illegal sources of funding. Hezbollah also controls a number of seats in the Lebanese Parliament and is part of the government. Thus the party also uses state funds to finance some of its charitable projects (hospitals, schools) and thereby increases its own popularity. In this light, the loss of Syria's financial support is unlikely to change much for Hezbollah's capabilities.

As already stated, Hezbollah's engagement with the al-Assad regime has partially compromised its once great popularity. What a part of the Lebanese population thinks about Hezbollah's involvement in Syria has been summed up by Saad al-Hariri, the son of the former Lebanese premier Rafik al-Hariri, claimed in a statement that Nasrallah is jeopardizing Lebanon, forging a "suicidal" link between it and the crisis in Syria for the sake of president Bashar al-Assad.²⁵ However, this point of view only represents a part of the population since Lebanon is split in two (or more) groups along divisions over the Syrian conflict. Hezbollah represents the most prominent actor on one side, which means that the movement will not be completely unpopular, in particular among the large Shia population that overwhelmingly supports the movement and the al-Assad regime.

Conclusion

Hezbollah's intervention in the Syrian conflict is in many respects natural in light of the movement's history and ideology. The movement would probably not have intervened if

Full transcript in English: <http://vineyardsaker.blogspot.it/2013/02/speech-of-hezbollah-secretary-general.html>.

²³ Matthew Levitt, "Hizbullah narco-terrorism. A growing cross-border threat", in *IHS Defense, Risk and Security*, September 2012, p. 34-41, available at <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/hizbullah-narco-terrorism-a-growing-cross-border-threat>.

²⁴ Douglas Farah, "Hezbollah's External Support Network in West Africa and Latin America", in *International Assessment and Strategy Center (IASC) Articles*, 4 August 2006, http://www.strategycenter.net/research/pubid.118/pub_detail.asp.

²⁵ Full text (in Arabic) is available in the Hariri's Facebook page: <https://www.facebook.com/Saad.R.Hariri/posts/10151868542028294>. For an English version see "Hariri Responding to Nasrallah: Hizbullah Linking Lebanon to Syria and Leading it to Destruction", in *Naharnet*, 1 May 2013, <http://www.naharnet.com/stories/en/81555>. See also "Hezbollah sacrificing Lebanon for Assad: Hariri", in *The Daily Star (Lebanon)*, 1 May 2013, <http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Politics/2013/May-01/215723-hezbollah-wants-to-sacrifice-lebanon-for-assad-hariri.ashx>.

the situation had not been at a critical turning point. The movement intervened in Syria after two years of conflict and only at a time when the regime had suffered worrying defeats. In the movement's view, a physical intervention was necessary if it wanted to preserve its status in Lebanon and in the region. The party not only has a local conception of its presence and role, but is engaged at the regional level as well. Hezbollah is a regional movement, finding support and funds and forging relations across the globe. The collapse of the Syrian regime and the internal situation in Lebanon were seen as a threat. This was the point when the intervention became necessary. In all this, religious motivations were not the main drivers. Rather, Hezbollah was keen on advancing its political goals. Its involvement in Syria has not been without its cost, however, as the movement has seen a decrease in its popularity among some sectors of the Lebanese population as well as among Arabs in general. These consequences of the movement's intervention could become more serious in the event of the fall of al-Assad, at which point Hezbollah could become the next target for the Syrian rebel group, particularly its most radical components. However, the movement, which constitutes one of the main actors in the region, will still preserve its position, at least in the medium-term, whatever the final outcome of the Syrian conflict will be.

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