

november 2017

The Consequences of Hezbollah's military intervention in Syria on the Lebanese Shia population and Relations with Israel

Observatoire du monde arabo-musulman
et du Sahel

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INTRODUCTION

In early 2011, Hezbollah declared that the popular uprisings in the region were part of a 'resistance project' which opposed the USA and its allies in the region; whereas Hassan Nasrallah criticised the accusations and conspiratorial claims that the USA was responsible for these revolutions. However, Hezbollah's official discourse and that of its leaders soon changed radically. The revolutions became a conspiracy stirred up by foreign powers against the 'resistance project', and targeted Iran, Syria and Hezbollah.

Hezbollah's turning point with regards to the recent events in the region certainly occurred with the beginning of the popular uprising in Syria. Hezbollah was a major foreign actor, helping the Assad regime alongside the Islamic Republic of Iran and Russia.

This analysis will first focus on the relationship between Hezbollah and the Syrian regime prior to the outbreak of the popular uprising of 2011 in Syria, and secondly the consequences of Hezbollah's military intervention on Shia Lebanese and on relations with the Israeli state.

I – The relationship between Syria and Hezbollah

After a difficult start in the 1980's during the Lebanese war, Hezbollah developed and has maintained very close relations with the regime in Damascus. The relations between Syrian authorities and Hezbollah grew stronger over time. There is now a solid alliance between the two actors, which was reinforced with the death of Hafez Al-Assad in 2000 and his son's arrival in office. Hafez Al-Assad used Hezbollah as a tool in his political relations with Iran. He also made use of Hezbollah to pressure Israel during the peace talks.

The situation changed under Assad's reign, especially after the withdrawal of Syrian forces from Lebanon in 2005 and after the 2006 war between Israel and Hezbollah. The relationship between Hezbollah and the Syrian regime progressively evolved from that of a temporary and tactical alliance - as was the case with Hafez Al-Assad - to a solid strategic alliance. Bashar Al-Assad strengthened the cooperation with Hezbollah on both the military and political levels.

Hezbollah has since become an important ally of the Syrian regime in Lebanon. Bashar Al-Assad met several times with Hassan Nasrallah, secretary general of Hezbollah. He continues to do so, unlike his father who had only met with him twice.¹ Furthermore, Hafez Al-Assad had imposed controls on the quantity and variety of weapons transferred to Hezbollah by Iran through the Damascus airport. Bashar Al-Assad gave the Iranian authorities much greater latitude. Hezbollah was thus able to acquire more technologically advanced weapons².

Hezbollah supported the hegemony of the Syrian regime until its forced departure in 2005, after massive popular uprisings demanding its withdrawal, and maintained close ties with Damascus after these events. In Hezbollah's political manifesto of 2009, the Syrian regime is described as:

“[having] recorded a distinctive attitude and supported the resistance movements in the region, and stood beside us in the most difficult circumstances, and sought to unify Arab efforts to secure the interests of the region and cope with its challenges. Hence, we [Hezbollah] emphasise the need to maintain the distinguished relations between Lebanon and Syria as a common political,

¹ Blanford, Nicholas (2011), *Warriors of God: Inside Hezbollah's Thirty-Year Struggle Against Israel*, New York: Random House, p. 290.

² *Ibid.*, p. 337.

security, and economic need, dictated by the interests of two countries and two peoples, by the imperatives of geopolitics and the requirements for Lebanese stability and facing common challenges.”³

This perspective was shared by Iran, Hezbollah's political and ideological sponsor. The Syrian regime is Iran's main strategic ally in the region. It was a key actor, as mentioned above, for the supply and resupply of Hezbollah's weapons. Tehran also perceived the Syrian popular uprising as an opportunity for its regional rivals - especially the Gulf monarchies led by Saudi Arabia - to weaken the position of a major ally and to undermine its power and influence in the Middle-East.

Given these conditions, Hezbollah first supported Assad's regime politically, and then launched a military intervention in Syria in late 2011 alongside Syrian troops and loyalist militias. The decision to intervene directly on the ground was proof of the new strategic relationship between the two actors.

2 – Hezbollah's military intervention in Syria

Hezbollah supported Damascus militarily, technically and logistically against different Syrian armed opposition groups. It helped train militias fighting for the Syrian regime, notably the 'Popular Committees' (*lijan al-sha'biyya*), which are composed of individuals from various religious communities including alawites, Sunnis, druzes and christians. Other militias had more direct links with Hezbollah, such as the *Quwat al-Rida* group, mainly composed of, but not only, Shia Syrians. Militias built with the support of Iranian leaders and Hezbollah itself have, for example, adopted the name of '*Hezbollah fi Suriyya*' (Hezbollah in Syria) and the ideology of *wilayat al-faqih*.⁴ Hezbollah has trained, and provided military equipment with Teheran's financial support, to approximately 10,000-20,000 militiamen in Syria.⁵

³ Manifesto 2009 (2009), « The New Hezbollah Manifesto », *Lebanon Renaissance*, <http://www.lebanonrenaissance.org/assets/Uploads/15-The-New-Hezbollah-Manifesto-Nov09.pdf>, (consulted September 13th 2010) ; Alami, Mona (2016), « Meet one of Hezbollah's teen fighters », *Al-Monitor*. <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2016/01/lebanon-hezbollah-teenagers-jihad-syria.html>,

⁴ Smyth, Phillip (2016), « How Iran Is Building Its Syrian Hezbollah », *The Washington Institute*, <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/how-iran-is-building-its-syrian-hezbollah>

⁵ Alipour, Farahmand (2015), « Syrian Shiites take up arms in support of Assad's army », *Al-Monitor*, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2015/08/syrian-shiite-militia.html#ixzz3IQxXNYZE> ; Alami, Mona (2016), « Meet one of Hezbollah's teen fighters », *op. cit.*

Hezbollah combatants in Syria are estimated at between 7,000 and 9,000, including elite troops, experts and reservists; for given periods rotating in and out of the country for thirty-day deployments.⁶ Until today, Hezbollah, alongside Iranian troops and the Russian air force, continues to provide crucial support to the Syrian regime's army and loyalist militias throughout Syrian territory. Hezbollah has played an especially important role in the conquest of East Aleppo from different Syrian armed opposition groups at the end of 2016 and recently in the Qalamoun region.

Hezbollah has also opened training camps near the city of Baalbek in the Bekaa valley, near the Syrian border, in order to train the youth of various religious communities; however, the majority of trainees in these camps are Shia. In order to develop the militias similar camps are being opened in Syria in order to combat the presence of extremist Sunni groups, such as ISIS and *Jabhat al-Nusra*, or other armed Syrian opposition groups in the borderlands.

The importance of Hezbollah's military involvement in Syria has been translated into the political and economic spheres which has further increased religious tensions. Hezbollah has increasingly expanded its range of activities in Syria by establishing a branch of *Imam Mahdi* scouts for the youth in Syria, something which exists since at least 2012. The *Imam Mahdi* scouts participate in similar activities to the Lebanese counterparts, such as voyages, sports, religious courses which include the promotion of *wilayat al-faqih*.⁷

On the political level, Hezbollah pushes the government to re-establish direct political relations with the Lebanese government and encourages cooperation between the two countries armies. Hezbollah also calls for an end to the Lebanese government's official policy of distancing adopted at the beginning of the conflict in Syria.⁸ The Minister for industry, and member of Hezbollah, Hussein Hajj Hassan, accompanied by a delegation of the Association of Lebanese Industrialists, has traveled to Syria in August to participate in the Damascus International Fair where he declared "we are here in our official capacity to celebrate the Syrian people and army, as well as the Lebanese state, the Lebanese army and the resistance for the Syrian victory over takfiri (jihadi) terrorism."

It would not be surprising to later see Lebanese real estate companies linked with or close to Hezbollah take advantage of reconstruction contracts in Syria.

⁶ *Ibid.* L'Orient-le-Jour and AFP (2014), « Marchands de légumes, commerçants ou étudiants, les hommes du Hezb fiers de combattre en Syrie », <http://www.lorientlejour.com/article/862890/-marchands-de-legumes-commerçants-ou-etudiants-les-hommes-du-hezb-fiers-de-combattre-en-syrie.html>.

⁷ Tamimi (-al), Aymenn Jawad (2016), « Syrian Hezbollah Militias of Nubl and Zahara' », *Syria Comment*, <http://www.joshualandis.com/blog/syrian-hezbollah-militias-nubl-zahara/>

⁸ The policy of distancing involves political neutrality with regards to the Syrian conflict to avoid the spread of conflict.

3 – The consequences of Hezbollah's military intervention

Hezbollah's intervention in Syria in support of President Assad's regime was first portrayed as necessary in order to save the 'Axis of Resistance' against Israel and 'the Palestinian cause' from a conspiracy by the West, Israel and the Gulf monarchies. This propaganda was accompanied by the duty to defend Shia villages on the Lebanese-Syrian border by sending Hezbollah soldiers. In his speeches Hassan Nasrallah underlined Hezbollah's role in the protection of Shia religious symbols such as the mausoleum of the Prophet Muhammad's granddaughter, the Al-Sayyida Zaynab sanctuary, in Damascus. He stated that it had already been the target of several attacks by terrorist groups.⁹ Despite proof of the presence of Hezbollah soldiers in different Syrian regions since early 2012, it was not until November 2013¹⁰ that Hezbollah's Secretary General acknowledged the party's large-scale involvement in Syria and not only involvement in sporadic skirmishes on the Lebanese-Syrian border to protect Shia villages.

Over the years, the discourse regarding the defence of the 'Axis of Resistance', even if present in the background, is ceding more and more space to a different line which emphasises an 'existential battle' against Sunni extremists, considered to be 'takfiris', for the protection of all of Lebanon. The increase in attacks since 2013 by Sunni jihadist groups targeting Shia-populated regions of Lebanon, Dahyeh in particular, have only strengthened the feeling of a 'takfiri menace' amongst the Lebanese Shia population. The emphasis Hezbollah places on the extremist Sunni jihadist danger is accompanied by Shia and denominational fundamentalist religious propaganda amongst the party members and its popular base, in order to legitimise and justify its military intervention in Syria. It was not uncommon to see Hezbollah soldiers on the battlefield in Syria wearing headbands embellished with the phrase 'O Hussain', an exaltation of Hussain ibn Ali, a revered Shia figure.¹¹ The involvement of foreign Shia combatants in Hezbollah, including Iraqis and Iranians, has increased the complaints of the Sunni population and increased religious tensions.

The importance of the jihadist threat in Hezbollah's media propaganda was noticed after the removal of the last ISIS militants still present on Lebanese territory these last few weeks. This occurred in the context of an agreement with Hezbollah, and the

⁹ Quoted in Rida, Nour (2013), « Sayyed Nasrallah: Hizbullah Not Responsible For Drone, Political Settlement Only Solution in Syria », *Al-Ahed News*. <http://www.english.alahednews.com.lb/essaydetails.php?eid=22984&cid=445#.VHbqNt7A1ss>

¹⁰ Al-Manar (2013), « Nuss khitâb al-Sayyid Nasr Allâh fi zikra 'Ashurâ' fi mal'ab al-râiyya fi al-Dâhiyya al-janubiyya », <http://www.almanar.com.lb/adetails.php?eid=356806>

¹¹ Blanford, Nicholas (2013), « The Battle for Qusayr: how the Syrian regime and Hizb Allah tipped the balance », *Combating Terrorism Center*. <https://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/the-battle-for-qusayr-how-the-syrian-regime-and-hizb-allah-tipped-the-balance>

organisation of celebrations in Baalbek the 31st of August 2017, which Hassan Nasrallah names 'the second liberation' of Lebanon, after the withdrawal of Israeli occupying forces in May 2000. In this same speech, Nasrallah declared: "day after day, we are more and more certain that ISIS and other takifiri groups are an American creation in Israel's service. This victory is part of the struggle against the Hebrew state. ISIS was created by the American administration to serve Israel's genocidal project".¹²

The military intervention in Syria has considerably strengthened Hezbollah from a military standpoint. A Hezbollah commander explained that the party was stronger than ever militarily, closing in on the model of a conventional army. The war in Syria has allowed a substantial increase in recruitment, with an increasing number of young combatants with significant experience.¹³ Hezbollah has also benefited from its collaboration with the Russian army in Syria to improve its strategies and military techniques and to increase its capacities for military operations and offensive strategies¹⁴, according to Alexandre Corbeil, analyst for The SecDev Group.¹⁵

¹² Al-Ahed News (2017), « al-Kalima al-mutalifiza li-samâha al-âmîn al-â'm li-hizb âllah li-sayyid Hassan nast âllah ba'd tahrîr al-jûrd min dâ'esh ». <https://alahednews.com.lb/141850/149#.VvBLMX-lyr4U>

¹³ George, Susannah (2015), « This Is Not Your Father's Hezbollah », *Foreign Policy*, https://foreignpolicy.com/2015/01/15/this-is-not-your-fathers-hezbollah/?utm_content=buffer48664&utm_medium=social&utm_source=facebook.com&utm_campaign=buffer

¹⁴ Katz, Muni and Pollack, Nadav (2015), « Hezbollah's Russian Military Education in Syria », *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*. <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/hezbollahs-russian-military-education-in-syria>

¹⁵ Corbeil, Alexandre (2016), « Hezbollah is learning in Russia », *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*. http://carnegieendowment.org/sada/?fa=62896&mkt_tok=3RkMMJWWfF9wsRovva3JZKXonjHpfsX54uouUK6g3843IUfwdcjKpmjrIYoFTMB0aPyQAgobGp5I5FEIQ7XYTLB2t60MWA%3D%3D

4 – The Lebanese Shia population

Shia-majority areas have experienced growing insecurity since Hezbollah's military intervention in Syria, increased religious tensions in Lebanon and throughout the Middle East to which both state and non-state Sunni and Shia actors have contributed, as well as the rising number of Hezbollah soldiers killed on Syrian battlefields. These phenomena have led, during the first few years (between 2011 and 2013) to a feeling of dissatisfaction amongst certain segments of the Lebanese Shia population and even within Hezbollah's popular base. The party never published any official statistics concerning the number of its soldiers killed in Syria since the beginning of its military intervention, but according to various estimates, it has surpassed 2,000-2,500 deaths and approximately 7,000 wounded at the beginning of 2017.¹⁶

Criticism has nevertheless been limited, probably due to Hezbollah's control of Shia-majority areas. There have been however, signs of growing discontent.

After the death of approximately twelve Hezbollah combatants in an ambush at Sayyida Zaynab outside of Damascus in April 2013, sheikh Muhammad Yazbeck, a high-ranking Hezbollah leader attended their funerals to offer his condolences to the family of one of the deceased. He was asked by the mother of one of the dead soldiers why Hezbollah was sending their youths to Syria given that their struggle was against Israel.¹⁷ In a similar situation, a delegation from the Baalbek region representing families of deceased Hezbollah combatants met Yazbeck in June 2013 and called Hezbollah's defence of the Syrian regime 'damaging and intolerable'. The delegation added that the intervention in Syria did not come under the group's *raison d'être* - resistance against Israel - and deepened the Sunni-Shia divide in Lebanon.¹⁸ Other individuals in the South of Lebanon, such as the journalist and critic of Hezbollah Ali Amine displayed similar feelings.¹⁹ In autumn 2013, according to Hisham Jaber, a retired Shia Lebanese army general, certain Shia families in the south of the country and members of Hezbollah questioned the wisdom of Hezbollah fighting other Muslims, even Sunnis.²⁰ In summer 2014, Hassan

¹⁶ Alami, Mona (2017), « Hezbollah Embedded in Syria », *Atlantic Council*, <http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/syriasource/hezbollah-is-embedded-in-syria>

¹⁷ Now Media (2013), « Al-Arabiya: Hezbollah fighters killed in ambush outside Damascus », <https://now.mmedia.me/lb/en/archive/al-arabiya-hezbollah-fighters-killed-in-ambush-outside-damascus>

¹⁸ Ya Libnan (2013), « Hezbollah facing resistance from within over its Syria role », <http://www.yalibnan.com/2013/07/07/hezbollah-facing-resistance-from-within-over-its-syria-role/>

¹⁹ Nakhoul, Samia (2013), « Special Report: Hezbollah gambles all in Syria », *Reuters*, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/09/26/us-syria-hezbollah-special-report-idUSBRE98P0A120130926>

²⁰ Dettmer, Jamie (2013) « Hezbollah Prepares for Syria Showdown in al-Qalamoun », *The Daily Beast*, <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2013/10/29/hezbollah-prepares-for-syria-showdown-in-al-qalamoun.html>

Nasrallah made a public appearance in the Bekaa valley to visit Hezbollah soldiers. He paid tribute to the families of dead soldiers to try and ease their anger following the loss of their loved ones in Hezbollah's military engagements.²¹

Nonetheless, a large majority of the Shia population supported Hezbollah, and remained dependant on the party despite criticism by certain individuals. No alternative to Hezbollah was presented by these critics. Large sections of the Lebanese Shia population believe that, in the current climate, a weakening of Hezbollah would weaken the entire community.²² The Lebanese state and army were not considered as protection against Sunni jihadist forces.

Many young Lebanese Shiites, especially those from the southern working class and often unemployed, have, and continue to join Hezbollah's military forces and fight in Syria.²³ The national and regional climate is marked by strong denominational tensions and the socio-economic situation in Lebanon is ever more difficult for the working class. Thus, the possibility for young Lebanese Shiites to receive a salary and social services as a soldier for Hezbollah, who is considered the protector of the Shia, is an attractive option.

Support for Hezbollah's military intervention in Syria has strengthened amongst the Lebanese Shia population following several attacks and suicide bombings, as stated above, carried out by Sunni jihadist groups targeting Shia-majority areas, including in Beirut, since the summer of 2013. With the creation and expansion of ISIS and the growing power of other jihadist groups such as *Jabhat al-Nusra* (originally linked to Al-Qaeda), Hezbollah's critics within its popular base and within the Lebanese Shia population in general have quietened. A large majority of Hezbollah's popular base is now convinced that the movement's survival depends on its ability to help the Syrian regime remain in power. This support goes beyond Hezbollah's popular base because 78.7% of Lebanese Shiites support the party's military intervention in Syria, according to an opinion poll conducted in 2015 by the association *Haya Bina*, of which the founder, Lokman Slim, is known for his hostile position towards Hezbollah.²⁴

²¹ Naylor, Hugh (2014), « Lebanon's once-mighty Hezbollah is facing attacks in Syria — and also at home », *Washington Post*. http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/lebanons-once-mighty-hezbollah-is-facing-attacks-in-syria--and-also-at-home/2014/10/27/81cd75a4-9d26-4f9b-b843-9fa0814b2471_story.html

²² International Crisis Group (ICG) (2014), « Lebanon's Hizbollah Turns Eastward to Syria », <http://www.crisisgroup.org/~/media/Files/Middle%20East%20North%20Africa/Iraq%20Syria%20Lebanon/Lebanon/153-lebanon-s-hizbollah-turns-eastward-to-syria.pdf>, p. 12.

²³ International Crisis Group (ICG) (2015), « Lebanon's Self-Defeating Survival Strategies », <http://www.crisisgroup.org/~media/Files/Middle%20East%20North%20Africa/Iraq%20Syria%20Lebanon/Lebanon/160-lebanon-s-self-defeating-survival-strategies.pdf>, p. 8.

²⁴ Kostrz, Marie (2016), « Le Hezbollah maître du jeu libanais », *Le Monde Diplomatique*, <https://www.monde-diplomatique.fr/2016/04/KOSTRZ/55214>

Hezbollah's successive military victories, and soldiers linked to the Syrian regime and supported by Iran and Russia against various armed syrian opposition forces, have strengthened the support for Hezbollah's action in Syria.

5 – Israel and Syria

Like the USA and a large number of European states, Israel has always preferred a political option with the minimum of change in Syria, especially as far as the regime structure is concerned; despite declarations by Israeli officials condemning the repression by Assad's security forces and calls to overthrow him during the summer of 2012. The priorities of the Israeli state were first and foremost preventing the civil war in Syria from spreading beyond its borders, preventing chemical weapons from falling into the hands of extremist islamist groups or being used against Israel, and the transfer of weapons to Hezbollah in Lebanon. Israeli military aviation bombed military targets in Syria several times since the beginning of the conflict in 2011. More than one hundred aerial raids have been carried out in Syria, according to the outgoing commander of the Israeli air force, Amir Eshe.²⁵ These raids targeted military research centres, military depots and military convoys which might have transferred weapons to Hezbollah. They were however of a limited extent in time and space.

The last Israeli air raid targeted a training camp and a branch of the Scientific Studies and Research Center (SSRC) in Syria, north of Masyaf, in the Hama province. The USA and former Israeli officials have accused the CERS of developing sarin gas, and nearly 300 of its employees are allegedly under American sanctions since the Khan Shaykhun attack in April 2017. The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR) also specified that the area targeted was known for its use by Iranian military personnel - considered to be 'experts' - and Hezbollah militants.²⁶

In August 2017, the Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu met the Russian President Vladimir Putin in Sochi, Russia. He reiterated his worries concerning the strong implantation of Iran and Hezbollah in Syria, accusing Iran of "transforming Syria

²⁵ Dadouch, Sarah and Heller, Jeffrey (2017) « Israel hits Syrian site said to be linked to chemical weapons », *Reuters* – <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-israel/israel-hits-syrian-site-said-to-be-linked-to-chemical-weapons-idUSKCN1BI0MH>

²⁶ Dadouch, Sarah and Heller, Jeffrey (2017) « Israel hits Syrian site said to be linked to chemical weapons », *Reuters* – <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-israel/israel-hits-syrian-site-said-to-be-linked-to-chemical-weapons-idUSKCN1BI0MH>

into an entrenched camp.”²⁷ The Israeli authorities publicly declared, several times, their opposition to the presence of Iranian troops, Hezbollah soldiers and other Shia fundamentalist militias near the border. They called upon Russia to prevent this from happening. Furthermore, the last Israeli raid against the Scientific Studies and Research Center was considered to be a sign of Israeli dissatisfaction with a ceasefire agreement in Southern Syria brokered by Washington and Moscow two months earlier. It was criticised by Israeli officials because their security concerns had not been taken into account.

6 – Hezbollah and Israel, Lebanon as a red line

Hezbollah, for its part, distinguishes between Israeli strikes targeting its positions in Syria and arms convoys delivering weapons to Hezbollah on one hand, and strikes targeting Lebanon on the other. Hezbollah has retaliated militarily to each Israeli incursion or attack on Lebanese soil, especially in 2013 and 2014. Hezbollah tried to send a clear message to Israeli officials: despite their massive intervention in Syria, the party was ready to face any form of aggression by the Israeli army.

Hassan Nasrallah declared during the celebrations of Ashura in November 2014 that Israel should fear Hezbollah's rockets because “they could reach all parts of occupied Palestine”. He confirmed that Hezbollah had never been turned away from its mission of protecting the southern Lebanese border, contrary to statements by Arab and Lebanese media which declared that the Syrian conflict had exhausted the group's capacities.²⁸

An attack in January 2015 by an Israeli helicopter in the Quneitra province in Syria, near the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights, of a Hezbollah convoy transporting Jihad Moughniyah and the commander Mohamad Issa, killed seven Hezbollah members. Following the attack, Nasrallah declared that “the Islamic resistance is no longer

²⁷ Dadouch, Sarah and Heller, Jeffrey (2017) « Israel hits Syrian site said to be linked to chemical weapons », *Reuters* – <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-israel/israel-hits-syrian-site-said-to-be-linked-to-chemical-weapons-idUSKCN1B10MH>

²⁸ As-Safir (2014), « Nasr Allâh: sawârikhnâ tutâl kâmel Falestîn al-muhtala ». <http://assafir.com/Article/1/382137> ; Khraiche, Dana(2014), « Nasrallah: Hezbollah achieving 'great victory' in Syria », *The Daily Star*, <http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Lebanon-News/2014/Nov-04/276471-nasrallah-says-hezbollah-rockets-can-reach-all-of-israel.ashx#ixzz3I6vIx0fM>

concerned with rules of engagement, we do not recognise them ... they have ended.” He added that it was Hezbollah’s right to retaliate anywhere at any moment.²⁹

Nonetheless, Hezbollah has kept the front on the southern Lebanese border stable, by avoiding clashes with the Israeli army, until January 2016 after the detonation of an improvised explosive device near Israeli military vehicles in the occupied Shebaa Farms. This did not cause any casualties. The attack was launched in retaliation to the killing of Samir Kantar, a former prisoner in Israeli jails who became a Hezbollah member following his release. The killing occurred a few weeks earlier, in December 2015, near Damascus, in a raid attributed to Israel.

Hezbollah’s leader Hassan Nasrallah promised to reply to this assassination “at a time and place Hezbollah will judge appropriate.” The Israeli state bombarded the city of Al-Wazzani and other regions of southern Lebanon in response.³⁰ No military escalation occurred after these events, although Hezbollah’s leader Hassan Nasrallah continued threatening Israel with serious consequences if it began another war with Lebanon. He stated that no red line would restrain Hezbollah and that the Lebanese party had prepared a list of sensitive Israeli targets, including nuclear installations, biological research centres and petrochemical factories. Nasrallah also insisted that Lebanon and Hezbollah were entitled to any and all forms of defensive weapons to protect Lebanon’s sovereignty and existence.³¹

The most recent Israeli raid targeting the SSRC occurred at the same time as the biggest military exercise by Israeli occupation forces in nineteen years on its northern border, it involved tens of thousands of troops. This exercise was described as a general rehearsal for a future war with Hezbollah.³² The head of Hezbollah’s parliamentary group, the Member of Parliament Mohammad Raad, reacted to these military exercises

²⁹ Al-Ahed News (2016), « mawqi’ ‘al-‘ahed’ al-ikhbârî yunshur mashâhid fidû hasrîyya wa jadîda lil-âmîn al-‘âm li-hizb Allâh Al-Sayyîd Nasr Allâh ». <http://www.alahednews.com.lb/119663/149-الاخباري-العهد-موقع/119663/149-#VvF3EyTAIsu>

³⁰ Davinson John and al-Khalidi Suleiman (2016), « Hezbollah targets Israeli forces with bomb, Israel shells south Lebanon », Reuters – <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-lebanon-security-israel-idUSKBN0U11C320160104>

³¹ Ahed News (Al-) (2016b), « Al-Sayyîd Nasr Allâh: kul al-kîyyân al-îsrâ’îlî wa ma fîhi min mafâ’il nawaîyya hadaf lanâ. wa al-Sa’ûdîyya ta’tal ây taqadam fî al-hal al-sîyyâsî bi-sûriyyâ », <http://www.alahednews.com.lb/122916/149-النا-هدف-نوية-مفاعل-من-فيه-وما-الاسرائيلي-الكيان-كل-الله-نصر-السيد/122916/149-#VvGCsCTAIsu>

³² Beaumont Peter (2017), « Israel reported to have bombed Syrian chemical weapons facility », *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/sep/07/israel-airstrike-syria-chemical-weapons-facility>.

by stating: “despite constant manoeuvres, Israel will be defeated if it attacks Lebanon.”

³³

Tensions between Hezbollah and Israel remain strong. This tense situation is worsened by the increasing importance of Iran and its proxies in Syria. Neither of these two actors, nor the USA nor Russia, have any interest in seeing a new medium or long-term war begin on the Lebanese-Israeli border in today's unstable regional climate. The priority of the international powers is the 'war on terror' against ISIS and other Sunni jihadist groups, and attempting to stabilise the region, including by keeping the Syrian regime in power. Israeli interventions and bombings on Syrian soil aimed at disrupting Hezbollah's or Hezbollah-linked military ambitions should not be ruled out.

³³ Quoted in l'Orient le Jour (2017), « Kaouk : « La bataille du Hezbollah contre le takfirisme se poursuit en Syrie » », <https://www.lorientlejour.com/article/1071597/kaouk-la-bataille-du-hezbollah-contre-le-takfirisme-se-poursuit-en-syrie-.html>.

CONCLUSION

In March 2017, sheikh Naim Qassem, deputy Secretary General of Hezbollah declared that “Hezbollah alone would decide when to leave Syria”. He added that this would happen when the party would have the firm guarantee that Syria would remain “part of the axis of resistance.”³⁴ Hezbollah’s political interests are deeply linked to those of Iran and President Assad’s regime. The stability of the Syrian regime and the defeat of every component of the armed Syrian opposition remain a priority for Hezbollah and for Tehran. The complete, or even partial, withdrawal of Hezbollah from Syria is thus not on the agenda in the near future. Furthermore, the vice-president of Hezbollah’s executive council, sheikh Nabil Qaouk, recently justified Hezbollah’s intervention in Syria and the need to continue it:

*“The liberation of the Jurds and the borders east of Lebanon from jihadists does not mean that the battle against ISIS and Fateh al-Sham is over, especially as Hezbollah will continue its battle in Deir ez-Zor, Idlib and al-Badia, three regions which host the largest concentration of al-Qaeda members in the world and is situated not far from Lebanon... Will Lebanon be protected if Idlib remains under the control of Fateh el-Sham and Al-Qaeda? Will Lebanon be protected if the presence of these groups in Syria persists? [...] It is to protect all the Lebanese and Lebanon that Hezbollah will continue its combat in Syria.”*³⁵

This is why military confrontation between Hezbollah and Israel, which was at the heart of Hezbollah’s identity, has been subordinated to the party’s and its regional allies’ political interests. The arming of Hezbollah has been increasingly oriented towards objectives other than the military struggle against Israel, depending on the context and periods. During the last few years, Hezbollah has concentrated its military actions in support of Syrian regime troops against different components of the opposition and against Sunni jihadist forces in Lebanon, Syria and even Iraq.³⁶

³⁴ Alami, Mona (2017), « Hezbollah Embedded in Syria », *op. cit.*

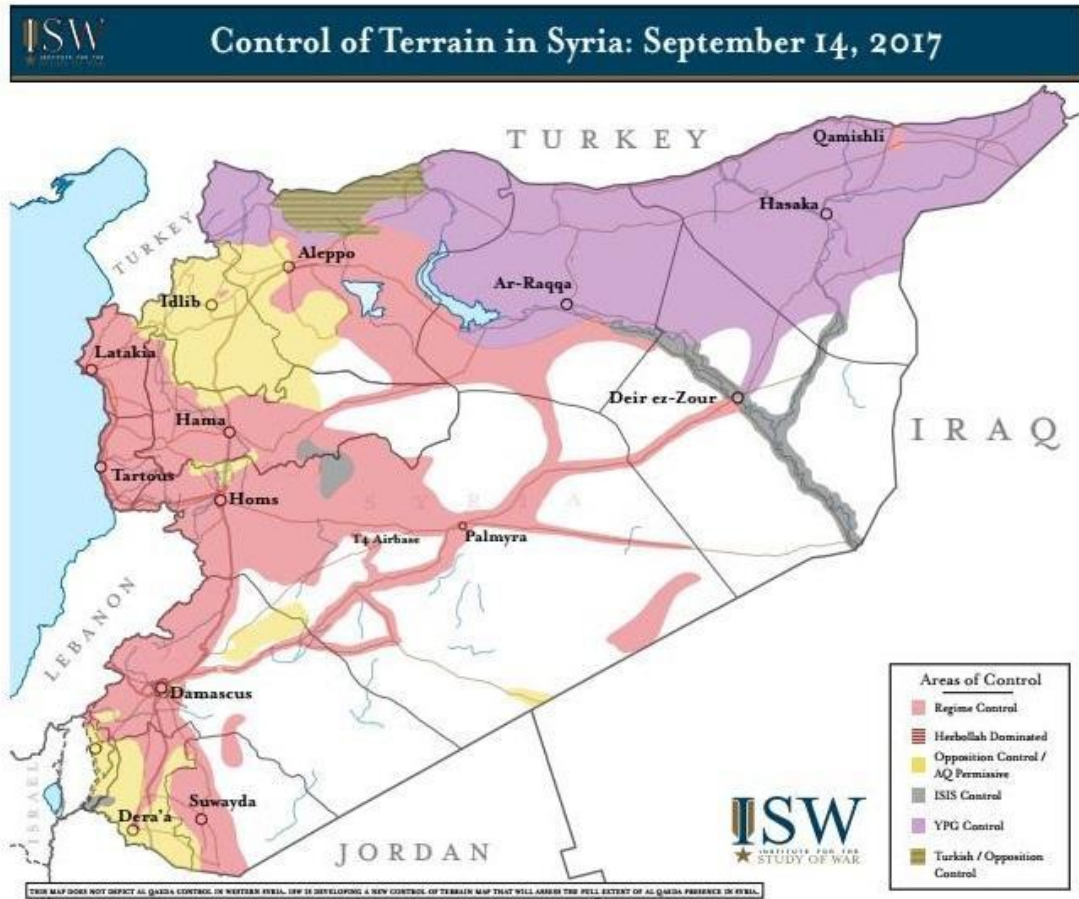
³⁵ Quoted in l’Orient le Jour (2017), « Kaouk : « La bataille du Hezbollah contre le takfirisme se poursuit en Syrie » », <https://www.lorientlejour.com/article/1071597/kaouk-la-bataille-du-hezbollah-contre-le-takfirisme-se-poursuit-en-syrie.html>

³⁶ Hezbollah increased its military presence in Iraq following the fall of Mosul into the hands of ISIS as of 2014, the group participated in battles against the jihadist group. Nasrallah publicly confirmed in February 2015 that Hezbollah was present in Iraq and was engaged in the struggle against ISIS (Al-Ahed News (2015), « al-kalima al-kâmila li-samâha al-âmin al-’âm li-hizb Allâh al-Sayyid Hassan Nasr Allâh fî zikra al-qâda al-shuhadâ’ li’âm 2015 », <http://www.alahednews.com.lb/107353/149/#.VfBwkST3Bss>).

Hezbollah's military and security apparatuses have been a key factor in the party's development. Its goal today is clearly to ensure the party's political position and oppose any threat which would reduce its political interests, even on a regional level; whilst maintaining the status-quo of Lebanon's political and economic denominational system.

The initial displeasure of certain members of Hezbollah has ceded to a large support for the movement, its intervention in Syria and its struggle against Sunni jihadist forces. In an unstable regional climate, marked by an increase in denominational tensions, it is highly unlikely to see Hezbollah's popular base leave the movement without the creation of a credible common alternative which would improve their conditions and popular interests. This is not a current issue.

ANNEXE I - MAP: CONTROL OF TERRAIN IN SYRIA



Source: Institute for the Study of War