

# Hizbullah in Syria

What has been achieved  
in addition to exit mechanism ?



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## Preface

Starting of 2012, Hezbollah entered Syrian soil to support Al-Assad forces timidly with preference of concealing its presence on the field during incursions into Syrian cities and towns by tanks. Moreover, announcing a clear position toward the movement in Syria was late, then gradually declared the party full support to Al-Assad forces, participating in military operations and taking the responsibility of supporting Syrian regime through media.

Since the strategic decision is made by Tehran than Al Dahieh in Beirut, Hezbollah didn't have any choice but to take part in the battlefield, knowing that all objectives from that decision are Iranian ones. In fact, Hezbollah role in Syria (as an arm for Iran's schemes execution in the eastern Arab region), Forced Tehran to make a decision of supporting Al-Assad regime against falling by all means necessary in order to prevent establishing any new hostile regime.

Lately, indicators of Hezbollah eminent withdrawal from Syria have increased for different reasons. A decision that could be an effective step toward its future as the party's last five years of contributions, made decisive steps to its history. Significant implications will occur upon withdrawal, on Hezbollah and its public incubator in Lebanon not to mention the regional significance in general.

## Cautious gradualism

Hezbollah responded to the call of Syrian regime in countering the public rise (in its infancy) along with the support of rigid Iranian decision with no delay however, the party's unwillingness of announcing the support of Syrian regime was, to maintain a great part of popularity and ties gained after the wars battled against Israel, the thing that made the party gradually engaged in Syrian War in addition to, justifying the reasons and motives of participation (gradually) presenting different kinds of versions that serves the purpose of engagement.

Hezbollah participation developed gradually as it started to participate with regime forces to conduct repressions against protesters through completely secret sniping operations, denying any presence on Syrian soils yet corroboration was showing the opposite. Hezbollah media played a great role in promoting versions against public movement in Syria, surpassing

the success made by Syrian regime's because the party presenters were more capable on addressing the situation of political divergence than Syrian regime presenters who were working only through one cultural environment.

Later, Hezbollah participated in many battlefields with few numbers. However, in 2013 (the party participation turned into an active part), expanding the military operations especially after coordinated attacks on towns and cities in Al-Qalamoun area and rural Homs which is adjacent to Lebanese borders, declaring that fighting on the battlefield became a must due to taking the lead in some battles by the party combatants, which made Hezbollah promote a propaganda of Lebanese people (Shia) being jeopardized by the takfirists (so-called by the party) in Al-Qalamoun area in addition to, shrines and Alulbayt graves desecration, calling upon the party fighters and all foreign Shiite militias (led by Iran) to defend the holy places in Syria but this propaganda disappeared after a political speech given by Hassan Nasrallah (the party Secretary General) in 2014 yet used secretly for purposes of mobilizing fighter and lessening the impact of casualties before public.

Number of Hezbollah fighters has increased gradually also it's thought that, the number hovered as it reached its peak between 2014 and 2015 when Syrian regime was in its weakest situations before the Russian intervention. Nowadays, there is an estimation of 2000 to 4000 of the party fighters in Syria <sup>(1)</sup>.

Secret participation for Hezbollah was not an option any more for different reasons:

Consecutive casualties in parallel with limited public foster due to existing in very small country (Lebanon) thus Hezbollah participation in Syria will turn into an issue before public opinion especially during a major division in the Lebanese political setting concerning Al-Assad regime.

It's thought that, Iran pushed toward positioning, after being unable to win the battle within weeks or months, therefore, the party was forced to present a propaganda about participation and its motives instead of being presented by other parties.

Declaration of overt participation after Battle of Al-Qusayr in 2013, made a direct challenge between the party and Arabian Gulf in particular, announcing a new political and strategic positioning of Hezbollah with an emergence of unprecedented era since the party establishment in 1982.

## Motives of engagement

The party participation motives, are a part of the whole Iranian scheme however, Hezbollah can make use of them as a justification of the engagement in Syria.

The most notable justifications are:

**Firstly:** Any new Syrian government is able to determine a number of elements in power relationships equation in Lebanon, the thing that may have implications on the party (which was established and supported under the patronage of Syria more than Iran).

**Secondly:** Syrian regime communal identity was a kind of guaranty of continuing the support from Al-Assad.

**Thirdly:** Al-Assad regime fall means a great loss of the main supply line because Iran was using Syria as a route to support Hezbollah moreover, the party has the ability to move in Syria more freely than Lebanon.

**Fourthly:** Shia Crescent is an Iranian scheme, aims to make a route between Tehran and Mediterranean (using the party as a tool), which means saving the Syrian regime (in its weakest situations) to facilitate obtaining concessions from Al-Assad, is a must.

**Fifthly:** According to Secretary General Statement, "Iranian direct and full support to Syrian regime also providing protection for it, is considered a battle of existence for the Iranian scheme which in case of success, will mean a victory for the party (working under the guardianship of Islamic Jurist, Wilayet al-Faqih, direction and fully funded by Tehran)".

## Gains and losses

### Gains:

The party military presence prevented Al-Assad fall yet the rate of engagement is unknown. However, Hezbollah failed in helping the government forces to seize more lands, comparing between area of land <sup>(2)</sup> controlled between end of 2012 and 2016, we find out that the percentage was better in 2012 <sup>(3)</sup>.

Mid of 2017 witnessed almost a complete control of Damascus western rural adjacent to Lebanese borders by Al-Assad allies, which secured the

supply route of the party giving Hezbollah the chance of promoting the event as a victory in front of the supporters.

Hezbollah engagement presented the party unexpected political gains through many factors: experience in battlefield, speaking of local language contrary to foreign fighters from Iraq and other countries. The party was able to provide fixed bases in regime-held areas, changing from providing combat services to department of foreign militias operations along with supervision of regime army operations.

Syrian War granted unprecedented chance for the party fighters to train more as they fought in different geographical and military environments, also participate in administrating security, informational and media operations in and out of Syria, providing training and advisory for foreign militias and Al-Assad forces in addition to fight with Russian and Iranian military forces, giving them military experience (never would gain in Lebanon<sup>4</sup>) at an international level, the thing which was missing in the foreign militias.

Hezbollah increased the dominance on state organs in Lebanon during last few years due to vacant presidency position and recession, exploiting the war in Syria to target Sunni component especially in the North, using the existence of Al-Nusra front with ISIL which abducted Lebanese civilians and soldiers in Aarsal town in Al-Qalamoun area as a tool to gain a favorable public opinion concerning the party political position towards Syrian regime and made a little progress with that between Shite and Christian settings.

### **Losses and Casualties:**

The previously mentioned gains, cost the party and its supporters a lot:

- Instant and short-term costs.
- Costs will cause an impact on the party's future role in Lebanon and the region.

On the ground, casualties cost Hezbollah dearly as some international reports show that the party lost between 2000 to 2500 fighter within 6 years not to mention the number of wounded which reached 7000, the real figures might be higher than that<sup>(5)</sup>. Dozens of security and military leaders (especially wanted by Interpol) were killed, foremost among them are:

Mustafa Badreddine, Jihad Mughniyah, Fadi Al Jazzar, Hassan Ali Jafal and Samir Al-Kuntar.

Figures of Hezbollah casualties and limited public foster, led to decreasing public approval of the party engagement in Syrian War with an obvious impact on number of military parades escorting the killed fighters in their funerals which were decreased between 2014 and 2015 <sup>(6)</sup>.

The previously mentioned figure about Hezbollah casualties, has left a deep impact on the party fighter's morale, trying to avoid the situation through media, financial compensations to families of killed fighters and excessive use of religious messages encouraging the public to sacrifice.

Strategically, Hezbollah has lost a great deal of popularity (after peaking in 2006) in Arab World, despite the support from many Islamic movements and Arab countries, the party wasn't able to achieve any military action (to regain some popularity) against Israel.

The party was designated as a terrorist organization by Arab League and the Gulf Cooperation Council before, to make things worse, United State Treasury Department has conducted tight sanctions. Despite of the emblematic designations, it forms an obstacle that prevents supporting countries from providing any patronage or propaganda for the party sake, added to the above.

## Will Hezbollah withdraw from Syria or be forced to do so?

Many implications were shown lately about the party withdrawal from Syria, some of them related to the party best interests and others are linked to the international atmosphere represented by current position of American president and Russia interests in the area.

As for Hezbollah, an implications of commencing conciliation with the so-called "takfirist terrorist groups", started to show on the table, making the Secretary General to address Fateh al-Sham (Al-Nusra Front previously) fighters for reconciliations in one of his speeches on 11/5/2017 by saying: "guys, there is no point in your struggle..... so let's solve this issue ..... we are ready, we as Hezbollah, Lebanese government is not ready to hold talks with Syrian regime but we are ready to guarantee any settlement just like the ones already happened in Syria, we can negotiate about places for gunmen with their weapons and families just like what done before, let's solve this issue...." <sup>(7)</sup>.



Moreover, the Secretary General, who is responsible for presenting political and media messages, began to talk about concluding the party security and military tasks in Syria.

On 2/5/2017, he said: “I can assure you that Lebanese borders especially eastern ones are safe now as there are no towns, bases, mountains, hills or outposts under any control of armed groups that might use to pose a military threat on any town or boarder area, as for the security threat, I can say that it reached a very low level” <sup>(8)</sup>.

However, first implication of the party starting withdrawal from Syria, came from the Secretary General speech on 11/5/2017, declaring dismantling of Hezbollah outposts on the Syrian-Lebanese borders “they are no longer needed” said Hassan Nasrallah. <sup>(9)</sup>.

Internationally, downsizing the Iranian influence was obvious as Hezbollah was the first priority in Trump’s agenda so the American president urged Iran and its militias to leave Syria, tightening the sanctions on the party leaders and financial sources. It’s expected that all Trump’s current and future attitudes toward Syria to be determined through this priority with the possibility that the withdrawal of Hezbollah will cause an easy achievement for Trump and a massive blow to Iran.

It’s thought that, after two years of Russian intervention, Moscow will seek to reduce the Iranian influence for its own benefit, which was clear in Eastern hoods of Aleppo as the Russian bombing forced opposition factions to make a pact of exiting these hoods. However, Iranian and Syrian militias were not able to enter these hoods and Russian military police were brought instead.

A recent indicator of this policy was, what published by Sputnik agency about the head of Russian delegation in Astana conference, Alexander Avrintiev after signing de-escalation accord, saying that: “in case of achieving a successful de-escalation settlement including Al-Ghouta, we can talk about the withdrawal of militias supported by Iran” An obvious request from Trump that is well-heard by Putin, which may lead to participation of American president in this settlement rather than rejecting it and forcing safe zones plan which prepared a time ago by US state and Pentagon.

## Impacts of possible withdrawal

Regression in Hezbollah role, is expected to lead to double impacts on Lebanon. From one hand, withdrawal will be an emblematic blow to the party prestige whether before its allies or rivals, also opening the door for being questioned politically from public opinion or rivals as the withdrawal to be deemed an indirect confession of being wrong concerning the intervention in Syria especially after failing in accomplishing the war objectives.

The withdrawal with the sense of defeat, will also mean, taking Hezbollah back to conflicts (may exacerbate in the future) between the party and other rival movements in Lebanon, the thing that may force the party to enter a new political and media fronts which could be more intense than the ones in Syria, as the main conflict to be fuelled between Amal movement (the main rival for the party seeking to take the lead of Shiite community) and Hezbollah. Amal movement chose almost to be impartial concerning the Syrian War with its local staff gloating Hezbollah losses and casualties.

From the other hand, Hezbollah will regain internal balance (lost due to unanimous intervention in Syria) after withdrawal moreover, heavy casualties along with captives, made their families see red, causing a war against Israel is also an option in order to regain the lost popularity and furious public foster.

However, Hezbollah return with no military action against Israel (using the pretext of being busy with fighting agents working for Israel in Syria) in the future, may cause heavy political losses. Most importantly is that, war against Israel or Syrian opposition is not an internal decision to make thus, there is a link with other issues, on top of them the agreement of Iranian nuclear situation and Iran role in Syria concerning regional and international interactions. All previously mentioned are outcomes can't be foreseen in the meantime.

Regionally, the party withdrawal (no matter what are the reasons) will indicate victory of the rival party (Amal movement), showing that Iran was not able to protect the party presence in Syria especially after the fact that, Assad forces couldn't regain control of all or even half of Syrian soils and withdrawal may coincide with Turkish forces reaching Damascus rural.

## Margins:

- <sup>1</sup> Special Report: Hezbollah gambles all in Syria, Reuters, 26/9/2017:  
<https://goo.gl/rovuEV>
- <sup>2</sup> Morris, Loveday, Assad regime 'controls less than a third of Syria', claims former premier, The Independent, 14/8/2012: <https://goo.gl/hWtSYA>
- <sup>3</sup> map of military influence December 2016, Jusoor for studies: <https://goo.gl/QslcQf>
- <sup>4</sup> Marisa Sullivan, Hezbollah in Syria, Under Standing War, Middle East Security Report 19, April 2014:<https://goo.gl/U4h2Q5>
- <sup>5</sup> Mona Alami, Will Hezbollah remain in Syria forever?, Newsweek, 28/3/2017:  
<https://goo.gl/XWcRct>
- <sup>6</sup> How the Syrian Civil War Has Transformed Hezbollah, The Nation, 30/3/2017:  
<https://goo.gl/hkjmpR>
- <sup>7</sup> Full text of the Secretary General speech, Islamic Resistance in Lebanon website. 11/5/2017 <https://goo.gl/ntNlfT>
- <sup>8</sup> Full text of the Secretary General speech, Islamic Resistance in Lebanon website. 2/5/2017<https://goo.gl/aIPzkF>
- <sup>9</sup> Full text of the Secretary General speech, Islamic Resistance in Lebanon website. 11/5/2017<https://goo.gl/ntNlfT>



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