



THE SYRIAN CIVIL WAR AND ITS CONSEQUENCES FOR HEZBOLLAH

By **Benedetta Berti**



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Beginning as a largely non-violent, non-sectarian political mobilization, the Syrian revolution gradually morphed into a protracted and bloody civil war as well as into a regional proxy conflict that has directly involved both regional states and non-state actors alike. Today, the Syrian conflict remains deeply internationalized, militarized and fractionalized. The domestic battlefield is characterized by a crucible of different political and armed movements. But while the fragmentation and proliferation of armed groups within the anti-Assad camp is well known, the Syrian regime has also been relying on a number of non-state allies. These include Syrian local ‘community-defense’ groups and other pro-regime paramilitary organizations; [Shiite militia groups](#) (mostly from Iraq) and, most notably, the Lebanese Hezbollah.

Indeed since the very beginning of the Syrian revolution, Hezbollah [clearly sided with the Bashar-al Assad regime](#), shifting from offering political support and solidarity to becoming one of the warring parties. The reasons behind Hezbollah’s ‘all-in’ approach with respect to the Syrian civil war are related to the historical strategic alliance between the Lebanese-Shiite organization and the Syrian regime; to the geo-strategic importance of preserving the so called ‘Axis of Refusal/resistance’ between Hezbollah, Syria and Iran as well as to the strength of the personal relationship between the group’s Secretary General, Hassan Nasrallah, and the Syrian President.

As a result, Hezbollah has grown to be a crucial ally of the Bashar al-Assad regime. In the process the group has evolved at the military and political level, ultimately impacting upon its strategic outlook, capabilities and role—both in Syria as well as back home in Lebanon.

In military terms, Hezbollah’s assistance to the regime has [greatly increased since 2011](#), shifting from an initial advisory role and limited military assistance to full military support. In practical terms, Hezbollah’s fighters have participated in both offensive and defensive operations, often embedded with the Syrian military, and have represented a key force-multiplier for the Assad regime. Over the past years, Hezbollah fighters have indeed helped the regime win a number of important tactical victories. including the battle over the border [town of al-Qusayr](#) and the long and bloody confrontation in the [Qalamoun region](#).

Needless to say, this prolonged involvement has directly impacted the group’s military capabilities and overall strategic outlook. As the direct military involvement has grown, Hezbollah now needs to sustain the presence of roughly 3,000-4,000 fighters on Syrian soil. This number, although significant, is not per se unsustainable for the organization, given the [post-2006 swelling](#) of its ranks and the recent and very much ongoing recruiting efforts, adding to what is believed to be a fighting force of 20-30,000 fighters (between full-time and part-time members). Even so, Hezbollah has been understandably concerned

about the number of casualties amongst its ranks, believed to be somewhere between, 1,200 and 1,700 fighters, if not because of the military implications of such losses, then certainly because of the negative political and legitimacy repercussions. Also, the sustained military deployment has meant ramping up the group's expenses, resulting in some financial pressure.

Hezbollah has so far been able to bear the ramping human and financial costs of the war; but there is no denying that being bogged down in the Syrian quagmire does limit its freedom of maneuver with respect to its other theaters of operations. For example, the price of an unintended escalation with its historical enemy, Israel, would be higher in the context of the ongoing military involvement in Syria. Still it is important to emphasize that the group's overall capabilities to engage in a confrontation with Israel have not been dramatically reduced and, what is more, the Syrian battlefield has increased the military capabilities of the organization, serving as a difficult yet valuable training ground for its soldiers.

The depth and length of Hezbollah's military involvement in Syria has also affected the group's interests with respect to the war as well as its relationship with the Bashar al-Assad regime. Simply put, after all the political capital, money and blood spilled to keep Bashar al-Assad in power, the stakes are extremely high for Nasrallah's organization. Both a collapse of the regime or a political transition that completely sidelined Assad and his core advisers would represent a significant loss for Hezbollah; rocking its status and power in Lebanon, empowering the domestic opposition to the group and perhaps even impacting on its relationship with the Lebanese Shi'ite community. To lay down its weapons and leave Syria without losing face or political capital, Hezbollah needs either an (admittedly unlikely) Assad victory, a political deal that leaves key parts of the regime in power, or a de facto partition that allows the Syrian regime—propped up by Iran and Hezbollah—to keep control over a strategic pocket of the country.

In turn, the situation has created a symbiotic dependency between the Syrian regime and Hezbollah: on the one hand Assad needs Hezbollah fighters on the ground as well as Iranian assistance to continue the war, in turn increasing its dependency on the Lebanese-Shi'ite group and on Tehran. On the other hand, because of the sunk costs related to losing Syria, Hezbollah is also in a position where it needs Assad to stay in power. Unsurprisingly, the involvement in Syria also further strengthens and deepens the strategic alliance and relationship with Iran, whose financial assistance is more than ever needed to sustain the military efforts and whose geo-strategic goals for Syria converge with Hezbollah's.

From Tehran's point of view, it is just as important for Hezbollah to be able to continue backing the Bashar al-Assad regime without having to become more directly involved in the fighting on the ground. Another interesting byproduct of Hezbollah's military involvement in Syria is the group's de facto involvement with Russia, as both parties stand on the same side of the civil war. The Russian military intervention in Syria was certainly a welcome development for all parties on the Assad side, including Hezbollah, as it followed a few months where Bashar al-Assad and his allies were losing more and more battles to an increasingly better funded and coordinated opposition. But whilst Russian support in Syria is good news for Hezbollah, it also may also come with a hefty price tag. For example, the [strength of Russian-Israeli relations](#) and the openly discussed shared interest in "de-conflicting" activities in Syria has resulted in a situation where reported Israeli operations against Hezbollah can continue even following Moscow's involvement on the ground, whilst Hezbollah's freedom of maneuver to respond has de facto been limited. Indeed, whilst Hezbollah and Russia (and Iran for that matter) have an immediate convergence of interests in propping up the Syrian regime, in the longer term their distinct geo-strategic interests may lead to tensions over, for example, the different "red lines" with respect to acceptable political deals to end the conflict.

But Hezbollah's involvement in Syria has not just altered its relationship with its previous allies, such as Syria and Iran; it has also heightened its rivalries and created new enemies, both in Syria and within Lebanon. Because of its military role supporting Assad, it is not surprising to note that Hezbollah is seen as a key enemy by anti-Assad opposition forces. In particular, Hezbollah is especially despised and targeted by groups operating within the "Salafi-jihadist" camp. This is certainly true when it comes to groups like Jabhat al-Nusra or the Islamic State: both organizations have engaged in a number of bloody [battles](#) against Hezbollah and in both cases their military rivalry is heightened by their belief that the group and the Shi'ite community in general is "heretical" in its interpretation of Islam. Similarly, within Lebanon, Hezbollah's assistance of the Syrian regime has not only fueled political and sectarian tensions between the Shi'ite and Sunni communities, but it has also resulted in direct violence against Nasrallah's group and the Shi'ite community in general. Indeed in the past few years there have been a number of direct attacks against Hezbollah; including [rocket attacks](#) against the "al-Dahiye"—the Hezbollah's stronghold in southern Beirut; [suicide bombings](#) against Shi'ite, Hezbollah and Iranian targets and operations targeting the Lebanese Armed Forces. For instance, al-Qaeda affiliated Abdullah Azzam Brigades bombed the [Iranian Embassy](#) in Beirut in November 2013; the Al Nusra Front in Lebanon claimed responsibility, among other attacks, for the a bloody suicide bombing in the Alawite Jabal Mohsen neighborhood in [Tripoli](#) in January 2015, and, more recently, ISIS itself took responsibility for a tragic suicide attack in south [Beirut](#) in November 2015.

In this context, it is possible to see how participating in the Syrian conflict has rendered Hezbollah more vulnerable to domestic attacks, while overall contributing to further polarization of the Lebanese political arena. In turn this has affected Hezbollah's domestic stance and national image, with its political opponents harshly [questioning](#) whether the historical label of "national resistance" has forever been shredded and replaced by that of "sectarian militia." In response, Hezbollah has invested in a political campaign to stress its self-image as a national resistance movement. Indeed Nasrallah has reiterated on numerous times that Hezbollah perceives itself as fighting and resisting against [two national enemies](#), the old Israeli foe as well as the "[takfiri threat](#)"—which Hezbollah is extremely keen to describe as a national challenge, not a sectarian one.

Finally, the ongoing Syrian conflict has also had an impact on Hezbollah's strategy with respect to its oldest and most intractable enemy, Israel. Here, however, it is perhaps surprising to note that such impact remains limited. Indeed nothing profound has changed in the group's attitude and strategy with respect to the "next war with Israel": since 2006 both Israel and Hezbollah have simultaneously continued to prepare for the next conflict, whilst preserving a strategic interest in delaying such confrontation.

Hezbollah's involvement in Syria does not fundamentally alter the equation: if anything, the Lebanese-Shiite organization is now even more interested in avoiding an all-out war with Israel while it is fighting in Syria alongside Assad and in Lebanon against the takfiri threat. Nasrallah's group has so far been determined to square the circle between two [competing strategic interests](#): the desire to avoid a fully-fledged war with Israel and the need to preserve a de facto deterrence and not to project weakness, both internally as well as toward its enemy. As a result, Hezbollah seems to have chosen a strategy of tit-for-tat, limited retaliation with respect to reported Israeli attacks against its equipment and personnel. For example, a reported [February 2014](#) rocket attack against Hezbollah targets along the Syrian-Lebanese border was met with unclaimed low-level attacks along the Golan demarcation line and by detonating an [explosive device](#) within the contested Shebaa Farms area. More recently, Hezbollah responded relatively swiftly and in a similar manner following a reported Israeli operation targeting Iranian and Hezbollah fighters in the Syrian Golan in the winter of 2015, focusing again its response along the Golan Heights and in the Shebaa Farms. The latest reported Israeli strike against Hezbollah targets occurred in December 2015 with the killing of Samir Kuntar, who had joined Hezbollah after his release from Israeli jails in the 2008 prisoners exchange with the Lebanese-Shiite organization and who had been active in setting up a stronghold in the Syrian Golan. The very high-profile nature of the operation has led Hezbollah to [publicly address](#) Kuntar's death both by pointing the finger at Israel and by promising retaliation, "no matter the cost." At the same time, the notion that Kuntar will be avenged "at a time and place the resistance choose" stresses the fact that Hezbollah is still balancing its need to strike back with its lack of interest in an all-out war. This may lead the group to invest in foreign operations.

In sum, there is little doubt that the Syrian civil war will continue to be highly consequential for Hezbollah in terms of military commitment, domestic political capital and regional role. Indeed, in the past few years, the prolonged engagement on the ground in Syria has redefined Hezbollah's relations with both historical allies such as Iran and the Assad regime, whilst at least partially altering its strategic calculus with respect to old foes like Israel. Meanwhile, Hezbollah has also had to deal with newly acquired enemies, such as ISIS and al-Nusra, while learning to engage with countries like Russia. In the longer term, the future development of the Syrian civil war will similarly impact Hezbollah's future evolution. The prolonged continuation of the conflict would likely increase the party's war-weariness and could negatively impact its military status and political legitimacy. At the same time, a "bad negotiated deal" would also represent a significant threat for the organization, weakening its status at home and regionally. As a result, Hezbollah—much like the other parties on the ground—is very much bogged down in a conflict the group needs to end but it cannot afford to lose.

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