The battle for Qalamoun: Hezbollah's victories and the Lebanese state's defeat

By Nayla Moussa*

The battle of Qalamoun, a mountainous region of Syria along the border with Lebanon, was announced by Hassan Nasrallah in February 2015. Beginning the first week of May, Nasrallah declared victory on May 16, arguing that Hezbollah intervened to liberate Lebanese land from "Takfiri fighters". Although claiming that 300 km2 were taken back from fighters, he also announced that the mountains around the Lebanese city of Arsal were still not "liberated". The battle is still raging.

Hezbollah's victory is a symbol of the defeat of the Lebanese state. It illustrates the failure of the army's operational reconstruction process after 1990 and the absence of consensus on its role within the framework of a National Defense Strategy**.**

The present situation is the result of unsolved – and indefinitely postponed – problems after the civil war. In the 1990s, the army was rebuilt under Syrian auspices, with a division of power on the security scene: Hezbollah was in charge of the external struggle against Israel whereas the army became a "super-police" to protect the Syrian-Lebanese security order, especially through its moukhabarat. After the Syrian withdrawal from Lebanon in 2005, however, Lebanese actors were unable to establish a new balance and to reach a consensus on a National Defense Strategy. This illustrates the limits of the rebuilding process and the insufficiency of reunifying the army and mixing its units on the sectarian level. Without a consensus on a strategy that defines enemies and who is in charge of fighting them, the army is paralyzed in a "wait-and-see" approach which leads to the extension of Hezbollah's role. In essence, the less the army does, the more Hezbollah will do. In the absence of a defined strategy, Hezbollah can argue that its battle in Qalamoun is to protect Lebanon from Jihadis perceived as much a threat as Israel. By doing so, Hezbollah extends its role from fighting against Israel to fighting against all enemies, monopolizing Lebanon's external security**.**

What then should be the army's mission? Qalamoun, and the war in Syria more broadly, has illustrated the ambiguities of its role and has required constant balancing from the military command: by securing the borders so that Hezbollah can intervene in Syria, the army is accused of fighting the war of Hezbollah and the Syrian regime against Jihadi fighters. Nasrallah clearly stated that Hezbollah did not want to involve the army in the Qalamoun battle and that they are "careful not to shed the blood of soldiers and officers". However, Hezbollah's allies intensified their criticism against the army because of its "inaction" in the mountains of Arsal where Jihadis took refuge after the Qalamoun battle. Nonetheless, the army cannot intervene without a political consensus, something difficult to achieve given the

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reluctance of Saad Hariri, the main Sunni leader, to approve an operation in this sensitive – Sunni – area.

In the absence of a clear political decision, the army command has demonstrated caution in the matter. General Kahwagi has to take into account the delicate sectarian balance within the institution, where Sunnis are highly represented. The crisis of May 2008 served as a first warning. When Hezbollah and its allies attacked Sunni areas in Beirut, Sunni officers presented their resignation; though the army rejected these resignations and was able to overcome the crisis, it might not be able to survive the next one. In addition, the army has received 3 billion dollars' worth of French equipment through a Saudi donation and US military assistance. This has of course had an impact on the army's position and adds to the complexity of the balance that the command has to find. Finally, there is much at stake for General Kahwagi, as his actions are closely watched. Lebanon has been without a president for more than a year, and Kahwagi believes that he has his chances. Both positions are held by the Maronite community, and in previous political crises electing the commander-in-chief as president has been the solution. Indeed; two of the three presidents since the civil war have been former commanders-in-chief of the army. Kahwagi is trying to avoid alienating any party.

While the army is paralyzed by all these considerations, Hezbollah is projecting itself beyond the Lebanese borders. This further weakens the Lebanese state, which does not have the monopoly of the legitimate use of violence and does not control an armed group that can intervene in other countries without the government's approval, despite its "neutral" position towards the Syrian conflict.

Despite its limitations, Hezbollah is promoting the Lebanese model at the regional level through its involvement in Syria and Iraq and through Nasrallah's call for the "lebanonization" of other security sectors. For Nasrallah, the transposition of Lebanon's "golden formula" ("the people, the army, and the resistance") to other Arab countries – a "hybridization" of the security sector - is the only solution to face security challenges, especially ISIS.

If the Syrian crisis has proved the inapplicability of the 1943 National Pact which established Lebanon's neutrality ("No to the East, no to the West"), it definitely did not lead to a new consensus. This is best evidenced by Hariri's positions, refusing to link Lebanon to regional events and stating that Hezbollah will take sole responsibility for its engagement in Syria and which does not concern the Lebanese army and state. He asserts that no "golden formula" would protect Lebanon, only national consensus will.

The adoption of a National Defense Strategy would probably not have totally preserved Lebanon from the consequences of the Syrian conflict mainly because of Lebanese actors' strong ties with external powers. Nonetheless, finding an agreement on such an important matter would have shown that "Lebanese" solutions are possible. In the current context of deep polarization, however, finding such an agreement is no longer possible. Whatever the outcomes of the war in Syria, it will be very difficult to discuss these issues and reach a consensus. Lebanon will continue to evolve from one crisis to another.

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About the author

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