Early Stages of Hezbollah’s Syrian activity

When Hezbollah entered Syria, the plan was to defend the Assad regime and guarantee that it stays in power. This plan was not communicated transparently to the Lebanese officials, people, or even Hezbollah’s popular base. Instead, the ‘Party of God’s’ official line was that its involvement was necessary in order to defend the Shiite villages along the border, and subsequently the Sayyeda Zeinab shrine in Damascus. This justification was needed at the time because admitting their intervention in Syria was to defend Assad was still considered unacceptable to the Lebanese people. It is – at the end of the day – interference in another country’s affairs. But this excuse marked the beginning of Hezbollah’s sectarian rhetoric: defending Shiites, their villages, and shrines limited the party’s rhetoric to one sect’s right to be safe and protected.
Yet Hezbollah’s Shiite supporters in Lebanon did not see this as a sectarian rhetoric or interference in another country’s affairs. On the contrary, this sectarian justification to be involved in war – despite the official Lebanese line of neutrality – sounded logical to Hezbollah’s support-base, as they have been told that the enemy is today the Sunni Takfiris (radical militants) and that the sacred fight is in Syria. As Hezbollah was getting ready to move its military machine form the south of Lebanon to Syria, the party’s media apparatus and institutions started to disseminate subliminal messages – which then turned into more direct language – about the eminent new threat to the Shiites: the Sunni Islamists who are leading the war in Syria against the resistance and the Shiites. To fight them is a matter of survival.

The party’s Shiite supporters have bought into this as a result of their prolonged fear and isolation. Hezbollah has managed to isolate the Shiite community in Lebanon since 2005, when it distanced itself and the community from other Lebanese who participated in the Cedar Revolution that removed the Syrian army from Lebanon. In 2008, this isolation became more dangerous as Hezbollah lead its militias to invade Beirut and the Druze mountains, forcing the March 14 government to submit to their violence and form a National Unity government, thereby giving more power to Hezbollah. This decisive moment has changed the dynamics between the Sunnis and Shiites in Lebanon. Hezbollah’s rhetoric towards the Sunni leadership at home and in the region has changed since then, and the community has slowly but surely been dragged into sectarian hatred and anger. As a result, when the Syria revolution started, it was not difficult to convince the Lebanese Shiites that they were in danger and that the new enemy was after them.

**Hezbollah’s Manifesto**

Fear is the best tool for lobbying, and sectarian language combined with fear was a perfect means of maintaining the Shiites’ support for Hezbollah’s battles both at home and in Syria. To accomplish this, a sacred element was added to Hezbollah’s rhetoric.

In the beginning of the 1980s, Hezbollah built its rhetoric to tie together political and historical narratives to gradually form a Shiite collective memory. The ‘Party of God’ employed the memory of the battle of Karbala, when an army sent by the Sunni Umayyad caliph Yazid I defeated Al Hussein bin Ali, grandson of the prophet Mohammad. This battle marks the root of the historical schism between Sunnis and Shiites; within Hezbollah’s rhetoric, resisting Israel became intertwined with Hussein and his family’s resistance to Yazid.

The family Hussein suffered and was eventually martyred in order to preserve the Shiite faith; Hezbollah invoked this martyrdom in reference to its ‘divine victory’ in the 2006 July War. In fact, tales of Hussein and his family’s spirit helping Hezbollah fighters in the battles against Israeli soldiers are still told and have been merged with the collective Karbala memories.

Today, many of the same symbols are being used by Hezbollah’s leaders to tie their fight in Syria to a scared mission. This time, it is not only to defend Shiites in Syria, or Lebanese on the borders, or even Shiite shrines for that matter; the real mission Hezbollah is marketing to its community is to save the Shiite existence exactly as Hussein bin Ali did in the year 680. It is a Shiite cause: the ultimate battle of existence. Their war in Syria is painted as a divine
battle to defend the Shiite faith and pave the way for the appearance of the “awaited” Al Mahdi, the twelfth Imam for the Shiites.

**Hezbollah’s changing status**

Times have changed Hezbollah’s Syria rhetoric, and the resistance rhetoric before it, built on religious myths and narratives of fear. The losses they have suffered in Syria, in addition to the indefinite delay of the promised victory, has made it very difficult for the Shiite community to remain cocooned with their collective memory of divine victories and sacred callings.

Hezbollah’s narrative has always been tied to a victory – the divine of victory. The collective memory of the Shiites has always been linked to victory. Even the Battle of Karbala, which saw serious defeats, was turned into a triumph of sorts. And that is exactly what is missing now: the dignity that overcomes death. Despite all the existential threats and the impending battles they support, the Shiites see only bodies of beloved sons coming back from Syria in coffins. Hezbollah is no more victorious, indefatigable and omnipotent.

In addition, the economy is no longer thriving and money is no longer coming from Iran as it used to. Iran’s regional ambitions have grown, and it now controls major parts of Lebanon, Syria, Iraq and Yemen, with armies and militias throughout these countries.

**The roll-out of ‘Plan B’**

When it became clear that Hezbollah could not maintain all of Syria under Assad’s control, Iran decided to move to ‘Plan B’, or what is called “the useful Syria;” that is, protecting the corridor that links the coastal region to the anti-Lebanon mountain chain – and thus to Hezbollah. Controlling these areas would secure the strategic corridor that Iran needs to protect its interests in Syria.

But even this plan is proving very difficult. This “useful Syria” is more vulnerable than originally thought. Even with money coming to Assad and Hezbollah after sanctions are lifted, maintaining the corridor will require more fighters, and it is already proving difficult to recruit fighters. To this point, Iran is now recruiting Hazaras (a Persian-speaking ethnic minority from Afghanistan) from Iranian prisons, who were arrested following raids of construction sites and under accusations of drug smuggling.¹ Iran is desperate to recruit more men.

Given this, Hezbollah is today moving towards negotiating with the rebels. According to reports, Hezbollah has started talks with Syrian military factions around Qalamoun, although it has not yet extended its discussion to political bodies such as the National Coalition. As a political solution this is still outside the realm of possibilities.² But this move towards limited dialogue presages two things: that Hezbollah is worried about maintaining its control over the corridor, and secondly that they prefer to secure their gains before a political solution can be put on the international table.

2. http://www.almodon.com/politics/5a293fec-480b-4d67-86e4-76d063604bf9
Hezbollah’s Future role

Deal or no deal, is not going to affect Hezbollah. What it means is that Iran and its militias in Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, and Yemen will have more money and resources. But it doesn’t mean that the rise of diplomacy between Iran and the West will be played out across the region. As long as the deal does not stipulate clearly Iran’s regional role, it will be allowed to go on with its aggressive behavior in the region. So, if the West does not force Hezbollah out of Syria, neither will Iran.

Even under sanctions, Iran has been bankrolling Hezbollah with up to $200 million a year. This budget has been cut by 40 percent in 2015 due to the economic crisis Iran is facing, caused by sanctions and the drop in oil prices. This reduction affected Hezbollah’s social and health services, not its military budget. Services were sacrificed for the sake of military strength.

Iran has always linked its security to its regional proxies in Syria, Iraq and Lebanon. They’ve spent billions of dollars to support these proxies, even under sanctions. If no one stops them from spending more money in the coming years on Hezbollah, they will continue. A more robust Hezbollah in Syria and Lebanon means a more robust Iran.

Hezbollah’s chief Hasan Nasrallah said recently: “A rich and strong Iran will be able to stand by its allies and friends, the people of the region, especially the resistance in Palestine, more than at any time in history.” And he is right. The billions already spent will not go to waste.

In Lebanon, Hezbollah will keep playing a political role, making sure to maintain strong control on state institutions, and all political, military and security decisions. They don’t need more from Lebanon. The war is in Syria now.

At home, Iran will play the game and show the West that they can respect the deal. It will take time and there will be ups and downs, but ultimately, Iran has taken the decision to join the international community. They will do whatever it takes to remain. In Syria, however, Iran will certainly not play ‘nicely’. If they do, Hezbollah will lose Syria and will be forced to go back to Lebanon, defeated and wounded and eventually cease to exist. Iran would not allow that. All Iranian political parties - hardliners, reformists and the new third wave –represented by President Hasan Rouhani- prefer having a strong Hezbollah.

So the US deal might see changes in Iran’s domestic set-up, but nothing in the deal - or in the discussions around it – demand or mean that Hezbollah (and other Iranian militias in the region) will be sent back home from Syria.

About the author

Hanin Ghaddar is the Managing Editor of NOW - English, where she writes commentaries and analysis on Lebanese and regional politics, mainly Hezbollah, the Shia community, Syria and Iran. She contributes regularly to a number of magazines and newspapers, including The New York Times, Foreign Policy and Tablet Magazine. Ghaddar is also a nonresident fellow at the Rafik Hariri Center - The Atlantic Council, and a former Public Policy Scholar at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars (Fall 2012). Prior to joining NOW Lebanon in 2007, Ghaddar wrote for Assafir, Annahar and Al-Hayat. She was a researcher for the UNDP - regional office between 2002 and 2004. Ghaddar holds a Bachelor's degree in English Literature and a Master's degree in Middle Eastern Studies, both from the American University in Beirut.

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