



## ROLE OF HEZBOLLAH IN THE SYRIAN CONFLICT

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### **Abstract:**

As the war in Syria is about to come to an end, Hezbollah's role in the conflict has only increased. Hezbollah, a Lebanese Shia militia and an ally of the Assad regime, had provided unflinching support to the regime, although it had cost them dearly. The organization had participated in the war and gave its justification by saying that if the aggression in Syria went unchecked it may reach into the interiors of Lebanon as well. Hezbollah along with Iran had managed to keep al-Assad in power; however, its intervention stoked sectarian fire engulfing the whole Middle East. The paper aims to explicate the role of Hezbollah in the Syrian conflict and how its intervention changed the balance of strife in the war in Syria.

**Keywords:** Hezbollah, Assad Regime, Iran, intervention, sectarian

### **1. Introduction**

*"Hezbollah has proved to be a key player in the Syrian conflict... in fact, without its presence on the battlefield, the Syrian government, notwithstanding the Iranian support, would have not been able to survive to the uprising" (Gagliardini, 2015).*

In December 2016, an article featured on the Al Jazeera website about the "The history of Hezbollah, from Israel to Syria." A portion of the article read, "...Hezbollah is in flux. Once a champion of Palestinian and Lebanese resistance, the group's popularity in the Middle East hovers at a new low due to its association with Bashar al-Assad's embattled regime in Syria. In a 2015 Zogby poll, 96 percent of Egyptians agreed that Hezbollah has contributed to growing regional extremism" (Hu, 2016). Nevertheless, Hezbollah's intervention in the Syrian conflict could be traced back to the year 2011, "when it operated on a limited and clandestine basis" (Sullivan, 2014). However, as the conflict turned more and more

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bloody, the role of Hezbollah turned more and more aggressive and at the same time, violent.

Hezbollah, a Lebanese Shia militia was established in 1982, *“as part of the Iranian revolutionary guard corps which was headed by religious clerics who wanted the organization to accept an Iranian guideline as a solution to Lebanese political mess”* (Faisal Mohammad Rather, 2015). The organization over a period of time grew more and more strong, and with its intervention in the Syrian conflict, it became a force to reckon with in the Middle East, although its intervention in the Syrian conflict received major criticism as its entry into the war paved way for sectarian animosity and further bloodshed. Susan Rice, the US ambassador to the UN stated that; *“Nasrallah’s fighters are now part of Assad’s killing machine and Hezbollah’s leaders continue to plot with Iran new measures to prop up a murderous and desperate dictator”* (CBS News, 2012).

Nevertheless, when the Syrian uprising turned into a war, not many had thought about Hezbollah’s intervention, and when it intervened, not many had thought that its support may prove so much helpful for the regime. Hezbollah had managed to keep Assad in power in Syria and it still remains a dominant force in the Middle East.

## **2. Background to the Intervention**

Hezbollah had *“flagrantly shown off its military forces in occupied Syria”* fighting with *“European made military grade all-terrain vehicles with Kornet anti-tank missiles attached to them, along with other light tanks. Hezbollah was known to be in possession of 130,000 missiles once and had greatly increased its capabilities after receiving weapons from the Syrian military”* (Roi Kais, 2016). On the other hand, the militia’s involvement in the Syrian conflict had brought the war to borders of Lebanon, which was defended by the Hezbollah and said *“if the aggression in Syria went unchecked they [rebels] would wipe out everyone in Lebanon”* (Faisal Mohammad Rather, 2015). Hezbollah, a major ally of the Assad regime in the Syrian conflict had helped the regime to stay alive and cling to power.

Since the ending decades of the twentieth century, Hezbollah has been one of the most important military and political actors in the Middle East. Hezbollah, after its establishment, rose to the level of becoming a state within a state in Lebanon. The word Hezbollah, when translated to English means, *“The party of God”* which suggests its deep religious inclinations. The party is strongly affiliated to the Shia faith which becomes evident from the fact that *“majority of its members follow this stream of Islam”* (Tokmajyan, 2014) and the party is headed by Sayed Hassan Nasrallah. Its ideology is based on *“building an Islamic republic, equivalent to an Islamic Caliphate, with strict hard-core interpretation of the Quran, which uses force and military power to threaten others. Just like the Salafi-jihadi ideology of ISIS and al-Qaeda, Wilayat-al-Faqih believes in theological reasons for recruiting fighters and justify martyrdom in attacks against the ‘evil’ west and its allies”* (Rujoleh, 2016).

Since late 2011, the organization had been fighting in Syria and its intervention in the conflict had been viewed as controversial *“due to the strong Shia background of Hezbollah,”* and *“the party was accused of inflaming sectarian violence in Syria by supporting the Syrian government –in which Alawites have influential positions –against a predominantly*

*Sunni armed opposition*" (Tokmajyan, 2014). The organization was also blamed for bringing the war to the borders of Lebanon.

On the other hand, the militia's decision to deploy its fighters in Syria was an expression of reasoning and character of the party which was based on the notion of defending the *"backbone of resistance"* (The Daily Star, 2013). However, its justification to intervene in Syria was primarily based on the defense of the Shia populated villages and the Shia revered holy sites that were being threatened by the Sunni extremist rebels. Hezbollah:

*"Gave members not belonging to its military wing the freedom to go to Syria without benefiting from party support. And so, Shiite fighters volunteered to go fight in Syria for three main reasons: The first was due to a fatwa (religious edict) issued by Hezbollah proclaiming that fighting in Syria was a form of Jihad (holy war). The second reason to fight resulted from the inflamed sectarian Shiite feeling of having to protect their religious shrines in Syria (the Sayyidah Zainab Shrine in Damascus and the Sayyidah Rouqayya Shrine in Douma, among others) from supposed Sunni usurpers. And the third emanated from financial need and Hezbollah's ability to invest in the conflict as a result of its considerable and wide-ranging ability to mobilize people."* (Al-Monitor, 2013)

Nonetheless, even before the full-fledged intervention, Hezbollah had deployed its fighters near Damascus in the al-Zabadani area which serves as a supply route to the Beeka valley, where the head-quarters of Hezbollah are situated (Will Fulton, 2013). On the other hand, Hezbollah used the "Takfiri" arguments to counter the critics who had been against the party's intervention in Syria. Although this was a gross:

*"Exaggeration of the real situation. It is evident that not all the fighters in Syria are takfiris and Hezbollah leadership is well aware of this. When Hezbollah pledged support to the Syrian government and provided military support, the Takfiri groups – mainly Jabhet al-Nusra and ISIS – were not as strong as they [became later]... In fact, Hezbollah is mainly located in the al-Qalamoon area where there are some jihadist activities, yet their stronghold is in the north and north east, where Hezbollah has no active military role."* (Tokmajyan, 2014)

### **3. Escalation of Strife and Hezbollah**

As the violent crackdown on the Syrian masses demanding democracy in Syria turned into a war, the regime received unflinching support from the organization. The organization had been working in close coordination with the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and the forces of the al-Assad regime. The regime had received a mammoth support from Hezbollah and Iran in its fight against the rebels and those fighting against it in Syria. In January 2015, a Hezbollah operative, *"Jihad Mughniyeh, along with IRGC Colonel Ali Reza Tabatabai and a number of Hezbollah operatives"* were

killed in an attack near Israeli border (Spyer, 2016). Nevertheless, as the fighting grew severe, the organization involved itself as per the requirement of the war. However, its involvement came with a heavy price:

*“The powerful Iranian-backed Hezbollah militia...suffer[ed] mounting battlefield casualties in neighboring Syria, as Tehran’s most important proxy plunges ever deeper into a potential quagmire. With Hezbollah increasingly shouldering the burden of the war on behalf of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad’s regime, the Lebanese militia face[d] the risk of overextending itself and puncturing its carefully cultivated image as an invincible fighting force...Hezbollah units are now spearheading the fight against opposition rebel groups while the faltering Syrian army plays a supporting role. Although the militia is highly secretive about the size of its footprint in Syria, Western officials and analysts believe[d] it ha[d] roughly 6,000 to 8,000 fighters on the ground there [inside Syria]” (LUCE, 2015).*

Hezbollah had also received arms from Russia, another major partner of the Assad regime in the War. *“Russia was supplying arms to Hezbollah as part of its ongoing operations in Syria, where it is working in conjunction with Iran and the Assad regime” (Ravid, 2016).* *“Hezbollah militants fighting in Syria were using American-made armored personnel carriers that were originally supplied to the Lebanese Army” (Isabel Kershner, 2016).* In the midst of the escalation of violence in Syria in late 2013, Hassan Nasrallah visited Iran twice to discuss the situation in Syria where *“Hezbollah Secretary-General Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah...‘secretly’ met with Iran’s supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei in Tehran to discuss” the Syrian crisis.*” (Al Arabya, 2013).

Nevertheless, the Syrian war was taking a toll on Hezbollah, since being a social organization as well, it *“was forced to cut its social services and raise its military budget,”* which led to *“divisions with the community of the party’s supporters” (Ghaddar, 2016).* The main victims were the organization’s women. *“The war in Syria mean[t] they [were] losing sons, brothers, and husbands. It [had] marginaliz[ed] their role in the party, and push[ed] the poorest among them to the edge of survival” (Ghaddar, 2016).*

On the other hand, the group had lost nearly fifteen hundred fighters in Syria since 2011 upto 2016, whereas forty five hundred were injured (Marc C. Johnson, 2016). Hezbollah has militia strength of less than 50,000, out of which 10,000 had been fighting in Syria (Marc C. Johnson, 2016). To maintain its army wing and fighters in Syria, Hezbollah had been receiving aid from Iran. The organization *“may have been receiving as much as \$200 million a year from Tehran, and in view of the Islamic Republic’s expectations of Hezbollah’s commitment in Syria, it’s not a stretch to assume that the group has received more money” (Marc C. Johnson, 2016).* Hezbollah began to conduct offensive operations in behalf of the Assad regime and:

*“The group ha[d] led large-scale offensives in areas that are most directly related to its own security, namely areas along the border like al-Qusayr and Qalamoun. But it has also operated further afield in Syria, such as in Aleppo or Deraa provinces, albeit in*

*smaller numbers. ...Hezbollah brings important capabilities to the fight, and this too has widened the geographic scope of Hezbollah's involvement. Hezbollah has played an integral role in the regime's ability to clear urban terrain in Damascus, Homs, and al-Qusayr and to conduct counter-insurgency operations in the mountain of Qalamoun."* (Sullivan, Hezbollah in Syria, 2014).

#### 4. Hezbollah, Iran and the Syrian Regime

As the war in Syria is nearing an end, Syria had been reeling under sanctions slapped over it by the west which devaluated the Syrian pound to its lowest and at this crucial point of time, Iran came to Syria's help and the *"embattled regime...arranged a \$1bn import credit line from Iran, in a sign of Tehran's financial support for its ally President Bashar al-Assad as he [fought] a spreading rebellion, international sanctions and a crippled economy"* (Michael Peel, 2013). On the other hand, as the Assad regime continued the violent crackdown over his people, this action of his alienated the international community who held a contrary view of the regime as the reports of gross human rights violations surfaced. *"What had infuriated the international body further was the use of chemical weapons allegedly by the Assad regime"* against his citizens in 2013, which killed more than 1400 civilians (Faisal Mohammad Rather, 2015). Nevertheless, both Iran and Hezbollah had been *"aiding Syria: 'They are establishing a popular army, trained by Hizballah and financed by Iran'"* (Mariano V. Ospina, 2014).

Iran and Syria have supported each other through many conflicts, and this one is not an exception. They need each other too much, in order to continue to have the same amount of influence within the region. It is also safe to say that a post-al-Assad regime in Syria would be lead by Sunnis and not Shiites; this would be a major blow for both Iran and Hizballah. Since the beginning of the relationship, al-Assad's regime has been Iran's closest ally, and it's the main connection between Iran and Hizballah. So if the current regime falls, there would be no way for Iran to continue its supply of arms, missiles and other types of arsenals to Lebanon and most importantly to Hizballah directly (Mariano V. Ospina, 2014).

Nonetheless, when the war was in its initial phases, both Iran and Hezbollah refrained from publicly accepting their role and support for the Assad regime which they later acknowledged, however, their intervention since the beginning of the war was due to the fear of losing a major ally in the Middle East, should the Assad regime lose in Syria. But their acknowledgement later never came as a surprise to anybody *"both Iran and Hizballah admitted the support"* (Mariano V. Ospina, 2014). Yet still, Hezbollah had pledged complete support for the Assad regime and Nasrallah *"vowed to defend the Syrian regime in his most forceful public statement of support . . . [and said] 'Syria has true friends in the region and the world that won't permit Syria to fall in the hands of America, Israel and [extremist] groups'"* (Dagher, 2013).

Nevertheless, According to the organization, Hezbollah had intervened in the Syrian conflict in behalf on the Assad regime but only after it was requested for it by the Syrian government. The *"Syrian President Bashar al-Assad ha[d] defended the presence of*

fighters from the Lebanese Shia Hezbollah movement among the ranks of the Syrian army, saying his government had legitimately requested their help” (Al Jazeera, Agencies, 2015). Assad also acknowledged Hezbollah’s support for the regime and said that the organization was “beyond loyal” (Al Jazeera, Agencies, 2015). Since “May 2013, it was ultimately learned, incontrovertibly and officially, that the Islamic Resistance in Lebanon, Hezbollah’s military organization parent, was engaged in combat in Syria in the Qusayr region alongside regular Syrian army troops” (Daher, 2015). In one such instance, “hundreds of Iranian troops had reached Syria...with weapons to mount a major ground offensive. They [were]...backed by Assad’s Lebanese Hezbollah allies” (Reuters, 2015).

However, as the fighting had prolonged over the years, Hezbollah had come under immense pressure about more intervention, but it pledged “further support” for the Assad regime in the Syrian civil war (Brown, 2016). Nevertheless, Hezbollah’s and Iranian intervention in the Syrian civil war sow the seeds of sectarian animosity and “the war in Syria...between mostly Sunni rebels and the regime of President Bashar al-Assad, who is backed by Hezbollah — only added fuel to the fire” (Alami, 2016), and the sectarian animosity only escalated with its intervention.

## 5. Conclusion

Hezbollah, the Lebanese Shia militia was established on the doctrines of Iranian revolutionary guard corps which was headed by religious clerics who wanted the organization to accept an Iranian guideline as a solution to Lebanese political mess. As the civilian uprising in Syria turned violent, Hezbollah’s intervention in behalf of the Assad regime made it a force to reckon with in the region as the organization in a show of strength managed to shift the balance of strife in Syria in Assad’s favour. Although, Hezbollah had come under pressure from local quarters, however, it still managed to participate in the war. Hezbollah, a social organization as well, had to cut its social budget for military needs but it successfully executed the strategy of compensating the former. As the war in Syria has come to an almost end Hezbollah had only proved to be stronger and carried out various joint operations with the Iranian and Assad Regime forces. However, its intervention was also seen as sectarian since the regime was contested by rebels, mainly Sunnis, and its intervention in behalf of the regime only added fuel to the sectarian fire in the region.

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