



# Hezbollah's Islamic Resistance in Syria

By Nikola Zikalova

Five years have passed since Hezbollah officially announced its involvement in the Syrian civil war. The Lebanese Shia Islamist militia turned out to be a key player for changing the course of the war in favour of the Syrian regime of Bashar Al Assad. While Hezbollah certainly changed the strategic dynamics of the conflict, the war itself also had a serious impact on Hezbollah as an organisation.

Hezbollah's intervention in the Syrian conflict heated sectarian tensions in Lebanon and alienated the Sunni communities there. While the international community was preoccupied with curbing the spread of Sunni extremist groups in Syria, little attention was paid to the expansion of Shia militias. Today, there are multiple Shia militias in Syria modelled after the successful example of Lebanese Hezbollah, receiving training, support and guidance from Hezbollah, Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps and Iraqi militias. In fact, Tehran is slowly building its strategic outreach in Syria, just as it did in Lebanon, Iraq, and elsewhere, with the aim of projecting its power. While on one hand it seemed that the Syrian war put the Axis of Resistance (re: Syria, Iran, Hezbollah, Iraqi Shia militias) under strain, it has also, in fact, deepened cooperation between the members and helped to create an ever closer alliance.

## **Rationale for Hezbollah's Involvement in Syria**

Hezbollah has been a long-term ally of the Syrian regime led by Bashar Al Assad. Its leader, Hassan Nasrallah, has portrayed the militia's presence in Syria as a necessary resistance to the United States, Israel and takfirist (i.e. Salafi jihadist) plot to overthrow the "legitimate" government. Hezbollah constructed a narrative of the necessity to protect Syria, 'the backbone of the resistance,' to save the future of Lebanon and the region. Nasrallah himself remarked (May 2013) that if 'Syria falls into the hands of America, Israel and the takfiris, the people of our region will go into a dark period.' However, the underlying reason for Hezbollah's involvement in Syria is the country's strategic importance. Syria has been

a transit country for weapons and financial support coming from Tehran to Hezbollah in Lebanon. Moreover, Hezbollah runs training camps and has built stockpiles of weapons in Syria. Without access to the material and financial support — without access to Syria — Hezbollah would lose a lot of its military capabilities important for its fight against Israel. Hence, winning the war in Syria is an existential matter for Party of God.

### **Impact of the War on Hezbollah**

The decision to fight alongside the Assad regime has had serious implications for Hezbollah itself. By entering the conflict, the group has transformed from a Lebanese resistance movement to a regional Shia militia, and an important strategic asset for Iran. Joining the war on Assad's side, combined with Hezbollah's sectarian rhetoric, alienated its Sunni supporters. Sunnis in Lebanon and Syria, who once respected Hezbollah for its military resistance to Israel, are now standing against it. Consequently, Hamas and other Palestinian groups, once Hezbollah's allies in the fight against Israel, have turned into foes. In addition, in early 2016 the members of Gulf Cooperation Council designated Hezbollah as a terrorist organisation — its Syrian adventure is costly and negatively influencing its standing in the wider region. It also puts pressure on its resources, which were initially reserved for fighting Israel and a lot of their fighters, including high-ranking officials, have been either wounded or killed. Despite that, the group acquired priceless battlefield experience in Syria boosting its military capabilities, from logistics, tactics, to cooperation with other forces, including an advanced conventional army—Russia's.

Its continued involvement signifies that, for Hezbollah, the preservation of the Syrian regime is more vital than its losses in materials and personnel. Hezbollah is now a stronger, more skilled militia, which has also strengthened its position within the Axis.

### **Implications of Hezbollah's Presence in Syria, Lebanon and Beyond**

#### **Syria**

Hezbollah's decision to fight in Syria was crucial for changing the course of the war in favour of Assad's regime. The group operated covertly in Syria prior to 2013, but a major shift came with the 2013 battle for Al-Qusayr, led by Hezbollah. Sunni rebel forces suffered a severe setback in this offensive and Hezbollah deepened its engagement in the country. Since then, Assad's forces have regained much of the rebel-controlled strategic areas (Al-Qusayr, Homs, Damascus, etc). With their experiences and discipline, Hezbollah's fighters helped to train and increase effectiveness of the Syrian and Iraqi forces fighting for Assad.

Hezbollah provided heavily armed Syrian forces with valuable knowledge about urban and guerrilla warfare tactics. Moreover, several Shia militias now operating in Syria, branded collectively as Islamic Resistance in Syria or Hezbollah in Syria, are based on Hezbollah's model and receive its training and support. Recruiting mainly from Shia villages across Syria, Hezbollah might be replicating its past activities in Iraq, where it helped to train and guide Iran-backed Shia militias such as Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq and Kata'ib Hezbollah. As the war in Syria drags on, the Shiite militias seem there to stay, allowing Tehran to project its power within Syria — as it did in Lebanon and Iraq — and ensuring an Iranian presence on the Mediterranean.

## **Lebanon**

Lebanon experienced some serious implications of Hezbollah's fighting in Syria. Hezbollah, as a Lebanese political actor, dragged the country to Syrian war unilaterally, demonstrating the diminishing role of the state. The sectarian narrative that Hezbollah developed to legitimise its Syrian involvement further isolated the Lebanese Shia community, which now completely relies on Hezbollah for income and social services. This dependence might be in direct correlation to Hezbollah's success in the May 2018 parliamentary elections. Despite losing some support of the Shia due to the high number of losses related to the war, Hezbollah remains embedded in the Shia community in Lebanon.

Consequently, the security situation in Lebanon deteriorated. Hezbollah's commitment to fighting in Syria was followed by series of car and suicide bombings against Hezbollah and Iranian targets in Lebanon—claimed mostly by Al Qaeda affiliates or Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL). As a sign of the Syrian war's spillover to Lebanon, Syrian rebels (re: ISIL, Tahrir al-Sham) captured some territory on the Lebanese side of the Eastern border with Syria, particularly around Aarsal. Only in mid-2017, after four years of deadly attacks across Lebanon, the Lebanese Army with Hezbollah regained full control over Lebanese territory. More recently, tit-for-tat attacks between pro-Assad forces and Israel in the Golan Heights, an area separating Israel and Syria and close to Southern Lebanese borders, have intensified. The attacks between pro-Iranian and Israeli forces have raised concerns about the possibility of an all-out war erupting between them, which may be waged in Lebanon. Indeed, Israel reacted to Hezbollah's election success by stating that in the case of conflict, it will not distinguish between Hezbollah and Lebanon.

## **Beyond**

Further implications that go beyond the Levant stem from Hezbollah's engagement in Syria. Hezbollah, not to say Iran, shows no signs of leaving Syria. In the

long run, Hezbollah's model of a state within a state might proliferate to Syria and expand from there. Proxy Shia militias (like Hezbollah) learn, under the supervision of Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, to fill the security and basic services vacuums — where government is lacking — gaining support of local population, consolidating power and preparing the ground for post-conflict elections. This dynamic occurred in Iraq where militias gained political power by exploiting the sense of marginalisation of the local Shia communities, winning control over the government after the 2003 US-led invasion.

It is also worth noting that Hezbollah continues to be very active in supporting the Houthis in Yemen and terrorist cell formation and attacks in the Arab Gulf countries, notably in Bahrain. The war in Syria has served to further embolden Iran and its Hezbollah ally.

Against this background, and considering how the sectarianisation of politics descended Iraq into a civil war, it seems necessary to closely monitor the evolution of the expansion of the sectarian-based political model represented by Hezbollah and the constellation of militias, including in post-war Syria.