

Hezbollah: Dreams of Expansion

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Brief Analysis

November 2, 2017

In mid-August, TV screens showed us the strange footage of Islamic State militants and their families travelling in buses protected by the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF), Hezbollah, and the Syrian Arab Army (SAA). Yesterday enemies, today the LAF, Hezbollah, and SAA are keen to move the Islamic State safely from the Lebanese border to the Syria-Iraq border, in an attempt to end yet another chapter in the long narrative of an internecine proxy war.

The Battle of Aarsal comes on the heels of Hassan Nasrallah's entry into the war in Syria, which is itself the result of an Iranian mandate for the party to play a more prominent role. The move was also a shift in Hezbollah's trajectory.

Hezbollah has worked hard to transform itself from a resistance movement in a small country like Lebanon into a regional power. Indeed, during its latest battle in Jaroud Aarsal, in which Hezbollah declared the end of any Islamic State presence along the Lebanon-Syria border, Hezbollah underscored just such a reality. Meanwhile, the group continues to tighten its grip over the Lebanese interior and attempts to involve the Lebanese Army in everything it does in an effort to replicate the Iranian model of the Revolutionary Guard and the regular army.

With the advent of the Syrian revolution in 2011, and the ensuing divisions and quarrels among various forces, a considerable number of the residents of the Syrian city of Qalamoun—most of whom are Sunni—fled across the Lebanese border and settled in the town of Aarsal. Aarsal, which in Aramaic means “throne of the Lord,” likely earned its name due to its location in the mountainous highlands along the Syria-Lebanon border. Today, however, the small town of no more than 35,000 has become a new arena for regional conflict.

Since the small town could not support the displaced in such large numbers, refugee camps were set up. Over time, Jabhat al-Nusra tightened its grip on the Aarsal camp, and friction grew between militants. Likewise, the Lebanese army was frequently the victim of casualties and kidnappings while trying to take control of the situation.

Meanwhile, Nasrallah made it clear that Hezbollah was fighting alongside Bashar al-Assad in a “holy war,” which in turn prompted militants to direct attacks inside Lebanon.

By mid-April, Assad spoke of Aarsal as an epicenter of so-called “militants” that must be bombed. The severity of SAA airstrikes and violations of Lebanese airspace increased in order to strike the camp.

The most dramatic shift, however, took place in August 2014 when sixteen Lebanese soldiers were kidnapped by Nusra. It was only then that grumbling voices began to rise up in the streets against Nasrallah and Hezbollah. Lebanese citizens now thought that Hezbollah's involvement in support of Assad had brought the Islamic State to their doorstep.

All attempts to rescue the soldiers failed until Qatar intervened and succeeded in persuading Nusra to release the kidnapped soldiers in exchange for the release of twenty-six prisoners in Lebanese prisons, including Saja al-Dulaimi, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi's ex-wife. However, the influence of Nusra did not end or diminish. On the contrary, its influence increased. The total area under Nusra control in the two countries reached 300 square kilometers as clashes and kidnappings continued and Nusra began directing attacks in the Lebanese interior to punish Hezbollah for its involvement in Syria.

On the anniversary of the July War, Nasrallah declared that it was the time to reclaim Aarsal. Nasrallah not only declared war, but announced a division of labor, saying, "Thanks to the wise political decision of President Michel Aoun, we and the Lebanese Army will fight the battle on the Lebanese side of the border and the Syrian army will lead the battle from Qalamoun in Syria, within days we will be declaring victory."

Indeed, the LAF mobilized to liberate 120 km of the 140 km under Islamic State control along the Lebanese border. In contrast, Hezbollah and the SAA recaptured, in stages, 270 km of the 310 km controlled by the Islamic State along the Syrian border before negotiations were held.

Nasrallah's decision to enter the war at this point, despite the fact that the party has been able to stem the flow of militants coming from Hezbollah-controlled Qalamoun since 2015, is clearly indicative of his intentions. By taking advantage of the international consensus regarding the inevitable demise of the Islamic State and freeing Lebanon of its supporters, Nasrallah would once again show himself to be the hero who liberated Lebanon from the Israelis in the July War. It was an opportunity to restore his relatively nonexistent popularity in Lebanon. At the same time, he spotted a chance to strengthen his regional position and finally help Iran exert its influence in the region.

Instead, Nasrallah surprised everyone by agreeing to unilaterally negotiate with the Islamic State, in order to reach an agreement that would guarantee the evacuation of 670 Nusra fighters from Lebanon to Albukamal, in eastern Syria. This was in exchange for guiding them to the location of the bodies of martyred Hezbollah and Lebanese soldiers, in addition to the body of Iranian soldier Mohsen Hajji, who was executed by ISIS on camera. Afterwards, Nasrallah declared an end to the war and congratulated the Lebanese people on their victory. The sudden renewed presence of Islamic State militants on its borders deeply troubled the Iraqi government and prompted Iraqi Prime Minister Haidar al-Abadi to call the transfer "unacceptable."

Furthermore, what the Iranians see as a step forward to exert their influence is perceived by the Saudis as an imminent threat. Officially, Saudi Arabia has remained silent on this particular issue, but one look at the titles of the articles published in Asharq al-Awsat—the newspaper owned by Prince Turki Bin Salman and considered the mouthpiece of the royal court—will show that a single talking point dominates: the ambitions of Iran in Lebanon. The paper also suggests that the Lebanese decision to go to war was made in Tehran.

Riyadh is not the only one keeping an eye on what is happening in Aarsal. Israel is also concerned by the Iranian presence on its periphery. A former senior Israeli official recently told the author, "Let's be clear that now, Hassan Nasrallah is Lebanon and Lebanon is Hassan Nasrallah, but what concerns us here is Iranian interference via Hezbollah in Syria. We will not allow Iran or Hezbollah to set up any bases in Syria. If they approach the Golan Heights, we will strike hard without hesitation. Maybe the last strike targeting a missile and chemical weapons factory in Hama made it clear to them that we will not hesitate to use force should they cross any red lines."

Deir al-Zour is the second-largest province in Syria and is important for several reasons. It is the most important

crossing point between Syria and Iraq because it is connected to the Iraqi provinces of Nineveh and Anbar and contains many oil and gas fields. Due to Deir al-Zour's strategic and logistical importance, the Islamic State has made a point to tighten its control over the province since 2014.

After all, Washington and Moscow believe that Deir al-Zour is one of the most important places in Syria where the Islamic State must be eliminated, with both looking past the war to see who will be able to exert their influence. General Valery Asapov, a senior Russian military advisor in Syria, was killed in Deir al-Zour; the involvement of a military commander like Asapov reflects the level of interest Moscow attaches to that strategic location.

Alliances in the battle highlight how this has become a proxy war: the U.S.-backed Syrian Democratic Forces and the Kurds on one side, and the Russian backed SAA coalition, Iran, and Hezbollah on the other, to rid the province of the Islamic State.

In the battle for Deir al-Zour, Nasrallah found a suitable opportunity to announce and lay the foundations of his regional strength. This would explain why, for the first time, the party peeled back some of the secrecy surrounding its military leadership in the field. Hezbollah revealed the name of its field commander in Deir al-Zour to be Haj Abu Mustafa during a television interview, in which he explained Hezbollah's role in the battle, thanked its allies—the Russians and Bashar al-Assad—and congratulated the Syrian people on their victory.

Mustafa's appearance on TV, as a semi-official military source announcing Hezbollah's victory to the Syrian people and stressing that "a single unified Syria will remain resistant to the grand conspiracy," was not random or coincidental. It was an entirely intentional and specific step in Hezbollah's media strategy to bring Hezbollah out from the underground.

Yet the role of Hezbollah, which dreams of expansion, does not stop in Syria. The self-proclaimed "soldiers of God" also play a prominent role in Iraq, albeit a relatively different one. While Hezbollah is fighting in Syria, its role in Iraq is limited to training. Hezbollah is overseeing the training of Iranian Liwa al Fatemiyoun in Iraq, and according to some fighters, it will send some elements to Hezbollah camps in southern Lebanon to receive urban warfare training.

It is not clear what Nasrallah's next step will be. Will he succeed in creating a new Revolutionary Guard? Or can he be stopped? ♦

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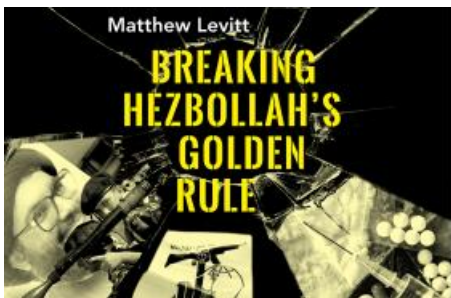
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