

Arsal: The Last Hurdle to Hezbollah's Safe Zone

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Brief Analysis

Absent vigorous international complaints, Hezbollah will force Syrian refugees out of eastern Lebanon to face certain persecution from the Assad regime.

With a reported force of five thousand fighters, Hezbollah has launched its long-anticipated offensive against militants in the Arsal and Qalamoun mountains, along the Lebanon-Syria border. The Syrian air force is aiding the effort by intensifying its strikes against militants around Arsal, on both sides of the border, while coordinating with Hezbollah and the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF). The Lebanese army is so far limiting its role to stopping militants from infiltrating into Lebanon.

Meanwhile, the Syrian refugees in the affected border regions of Lebanon, most of whom are Sunni Muslim, are facing organized political and public pressure to leave the country. Given their miserable living conditions, some are actually accepting Hezbollah's deal to cross the border and live under the militant group and Syrian government, led by Bashar al-Assad. As of July 12, 250 refugees had already relocated from Arsal due south to Asal al-Ward, in the Qalamoun area. The progress of the Arsal battle and the rising pressure against the refugees could force others to follow suit. Absent a political, social, and economic policy for the repatriation of Syrian refugees in Lebanon, pressure and violence against them will only lead to more conflicts.

Why Arsal and Why Now?

Hezbollah has always considered Arsal -- located in Lebanon but with environs stretching into Syria -- a dangerous spot for two reasons. First, its population, in addition to the Sunni Syrian refugees, spoils Hezbollah's uninterrupted control over the Syrian side of the border and its towns. These Sunnis also impair Hezbollah's efforts to demographically alter areas it controls along the corridor from the Syrian coast to the Lebanese border -- namely, Iran's "useful Syria." (<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/irans-useful-syria-is->

practically-complete)

Arsal today hosts around 50,000 Syrian refugees, some of them on its outskirts, where Hezbollah is battling the militants. The LAF is considered the main security authority in the town, but Hezbollah has also been involved in many clashes against Islamic State and Hayat Tahrir al-Sham militants, whose numbers are estimated at a thousand.

Earlier this month, the LAF was criticized heavily by Lebanese and international human rights organizations for mistreating Syrian detainees. When the army raided the town on June 30, it arrested 350 Syrian refugees, 4 of whom died under torture, an unprecedented incident that further split the Lebanese political scene and public opinion on the issue of refugees and the army. The army was forced to open an investigation into the deaths, but many activists are questioning the credibility of the process.

During the same week, three Syrian refugee settlements in the Beqa Valley towns of Qab Elias and Tal Sarhoun were set on fire, destroying the tents and possessions of many inhabitants. Yet no arrests were made. These incidents appear to have stirred anti-refugee sentiment across Lebanon, prompting an array of related attacks. Amid this increased violence, the Hezbollah leadership began its political campaign demanding coordination between the Lebanese and Syrian governments on returning the refugees to "safe areas" in Syria. Dovetailing with the Hezbollah campaign, a number of Lebanese pro-Hezbollah government and political leaders made statements associating refugees with terrorism and calling for their return to Syria.

The recent Hezbollah gestures on Arsal represent a marked shift since 2012, when residents first escaped to the area from the Syrian border towns and villages conquered by the militant group. Back then, the plan was to push Syrians considered anti-regime out of Syria and demographically secure Damascus and the areas around the Lebanese border. But today, with Assad feeling more powerful than ever -- and Hezbollah more confident in Syria and the region -- these actors believe the refugees will simply go wherever they are sent, and that their presence in Lebanon no longer represents the better scenario. As a result of Hezbollah's propaganda against the refugees in general, and in Arsal in particular -- culminating with a campaign that will inevitably push them out -- the refugees' security has become an urgent issue that must be dealt with wisely.

The New Syrian Context

Earlier this year, Hezbollah tried to avoid the current military operation in Arsal by initiating negotiations with Saraya Ahl al-Sham -- a moderate rebel group affiliated with the Free Syrian Army (FSA) in the Qalamoun area, along the Lebanon border. In attempting to broker this deal, Hezbollah stipulated the return of the refugees to all but six towns along the strategic Damascus-Homs highway, which is under Hezbollah and Assad-regime control. Army deserters and FSA fighters would be given immunity and even allowed to join Saraya Ahl al-Sham. The deal, however, was grounded by the idea of continued Hezbollah control of the area, in addition to Saraya Ahl al-Sham's complete lack of trust toward Hezbollah and the Syrian regime.

The timing of these earlier negotiations also bears noting. Reports of talks first surfaced in February, right after U.S. president Donald Trump announced his plan to establish safe zones in Syria to protect displaced people -- plans that have yet to materialize. In a way, the proposed deal suggested an alternative Hezbollah-run safe zone, with Hezbollah controlling all the Lebanese border towns and Assad securing the Syrian towns within the corridor and near Damascus, helped by a considerable Hezbollah presence.

Of course, the deal would have worked perfectly for Hezbollah. Thus, it would have delegated the responsibility of opening borders and facilitating cross-border trade and movement to the Syrian and Lebanese authorities. Further, Sunni refugees would have been pushed out of Arsal, expediting Hezbollah control over the border and thereby forcing the Lebanese government to give legitimacy to the Assad regime.

As compared to the Jordanian and Turkish governments, which have turned against Assad during the war, Lebanon's official ties to the Syrian regime are more complicated. Despite the Syrian army's withdrawal from Lebanon in 2005, following nearly three decades of occupation, the borders have never been demarcated. In addition, the Syrian Lebanese Higher Council, created in 1991, produced a number of bilateral agreements, including the controversial Fraternity, Cooperation, and Coordination Treaty, which formalized the Syrian regime as a power broker in Lebanon. Although neither the entity nor the treaty has been active recently, they are still intact and could be resuscitated if both countries saw advantage in such a move.

Hezbollah's Default Safe Zone

Given the military offensive just initiated, it is only a matter of time before Hezbollah drives the militants out of Aarsal and declares another victory over the *takfiris* (Muslims who accuse their coreligionists of apostasy). Thus will follow the return of more refugees to Syria, eventually allowing Hezbollah to create its own safe zone in Lebanon and along the Syrian borders. One way or another, the refugees will come under Hezbollah control, whether they stay in the Hezbollah-run safe zone or return to Syria to live under Assad's rule.

In the medium term, Hezbollah will enjoy unchallenged areas of control around the Lebanon-Syria border, a secure supply line to and from its home country, and a domestic boost based on the declaration of a victory -- even a symbolic one. Hezbollah will exploit this victory to regain the support of its constituency -- with such support having dwindled from the group's involvement in a foreign war and its attendant losses -- but also from the overall Lebanese population, which still lives in fear of terrorist attacks.

The consequences of a Hezbollah-run safe zone will be grave for both humanitarian and political reasons. Such a development will worsen frustration among returnees to Syria, making them ripe for recruitment by Islamist groups -- if not now, then in a few years. Especially if Assad and Hezbollah treat the returning Sunnis as badly as expected, the seeds will be planted for the next incarnation of Sunni jihadists. Politically, Assad will gain more legitimacy, the Lebanese government will, by default, be coordinating with the Assad government (if coordination occurs between their two armies), and Hezbollah will come out the winner, on the ground and politically.

To avoid these repercussions, international talks on Syria ceasefire deals should incorporate long-term challenges, including refugees and the actual safety of the zones to which they return. Such discussions should also account for the true reasons behind the Syria conflict -- and acknowledge that most refugees, at least in Lebanon, were fleeing Assad and Hezbollah, not the Islamic State.

In broader terms, international treaties forbid the forcible return of refugees or asylum seekers to a country where they are likely to be persecuted (the technical term is "nonrefoulement"). The Lebanese government needs to make clear that it -- and, especially, the LAF -- will not be a party to any such actions. Beirut should appeal for strong international support, both diplomatic and material, for such a stance. Such support would include unambiguous statements that absent ample international humanitarian aid for the refugees, Lebanese public opinion will be hostile to them. If the international community stays quiet on this matter, Lebanese politicians will not have the stomach to complain.

Hanin Ghaddar, a veteran Lebanese journalist and researcher, is the Friedmann Visiting Fellow at The Washington Institute. ❖



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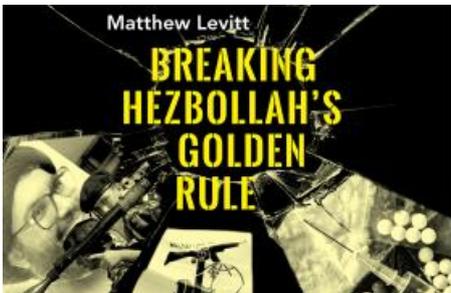
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