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From Lebanon to Syria

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Brief Analysis

Syria and Lebanon have always had a contentious border, but the Syrian war -- and its different factions -- have made it far more complex than before.

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Following the December 2015 assassination of Hezbollah leader Samir al-Qintar, who had been training Syrian groups in the south of the country, Hezbollah Secretary-General Hassan Nasrallah made an appearance to announce that retaliation would happen at the right time and place. However, Nasrallah's eulogy conveyed a new message: fronts would be unified and opened to one another, meaning that Lebanon and Syria's southern fronts would become one. Nasrallah's position was based on several facts- primarily the expanding Iranian influence in the Quneitra Governorate on the Syrian-Israeli border. In that region, Mount Hermon plays a strategic role for several parties involved, with its triangular shape extending between Lebanon, Syria, and Israel.

At the Lebanese foot of Mount Hermon, an ancient road connects Lebanon to Syria. Back in the old days, this road was the main line of communication between the two countries. Now, it is a strategic necessity for Hezbollah as it provides a direct and fast connection to Syria. Hezbollah wants to reconstruct this road and control its surroundings to both allow its fighters to move quickly and easily between the two countries and also to facilitate the transportation of weapons. Cutting through the village of Deir al-Aashayer, the road constitutes a central meeting point for Lebanon's majority-Shiite southern regions, which are largely controlled by Hezbollah. The route is intrinsic to the Bekaa Valley as well – a stronghold of strategic depth for Hezbollah in spite of the numerous Sunni regions that exhibit a fierce opposition to the group. However, the Sunni population is subdued by Hezbollah's military power, enabling the group to move freely between the south and Bekaa Valley.

In fact, Hezbollah controls many connecting roads. Besides the southeast crossing to Deir al-Aashayer and its

surroundings, where Hezbollah is rapidly purchasing land, it created a new crossing from the northeast to its southern stronghold, which runs through the connecting area between the South and West Bekaa, south of Jezzine. A decade ago, Hezbollah purchased lands extensively in those regions and established new roads and residential compounds, thus gaining full control over the area and ensuring smooth movement from the South up to Bekaa and on to Syria.

Nasrallah's speech about opened and unified fronts was not mere political talk. There were fundamental geographical and operational aspects to it. What is happening in that border region mostly resembles the demographic sorting and transferring taking place in Syria, everywhere from Damascus to Qalamoun. Qalamoun is an essential path from Damascus to the Syrian coast and a strategic element of "useful Syria." Located on the Lebanese-Syrian borders, Qalamoun is one of the largest regions in the Rif Dimashq Governorate, connecting Eastern Ghouta to the south with Homs to the north. Homs was one of the first Syrian governorates to witness demographic alteration as a result of the civil war. Entire neighborhoods were burned down, and all real estate departments were set on fire, destroying all the title deeds of its original residents. The first civilian transfer agreement took place in Homs: Starting with the old neighborhoods, demographic cleansing expanded to the entire governorate, and its residents were replaced with Alawites and Shiites.

Al-Qusayr, in the mountains of Homs, was the stage of Hezbollah's first battle. It finally fell to the group on May 16, 2013, following fierce fighting. With battles later reaching the other regions and neighborhoods of the governorate, Hezbollah established a military base in al-Qusayr, and many Lebanese residents were moved from the Lebanese towns across the borders to al-Qusayr and its surrounding areas. Afterward, Hezbollah engaged in battles in Qalamoun and managed to control its towns and cities. Original residents left, and others were brought in from Syrian and even Lebanese regions. The sectarian identity of those adjacent Syrian and Lebanese regions became one of a frequent confession. Meanwhile, the Lebanese Sunni towns in between, politically and militarily subdued, had no power to change the situation.

Displacement and demographic alteration extended to al-Tufayl, a town located in between Lebanon and Syria. In 2014, the town's five thousand Sunni residents were removed from their homes at the end of the first round of the Qalamoun battles and placed in tents as refugees. Their removal of the population of A-Tufayl, which was under the control of Hezbollah and the Syrian army, was a critical goal for Hezbollah. First, the group needed to preserve the "common sectarian identity." Moreover, the region, in the long run, could ensure quick passage between Lebanon and Syria. Indeed, the road connecting al-Tufayl to Brital provides a much easier passageway between the two countries than the other main roads. While the apparent aim is to provide a fast track for fighters and weapons from Syria into Lebanon, Hezbollah's ambitions are much bigger.

A few months ago, Lebanon's Maronite Church raised the issue of land and property sale in many Christian regions, mainly Akoura and its mountains, and Lassa in the Jbeil District. Geographically, these mountains separate the Jbeil District from the Baalbeck-Hermel District, which is under the absolute control of Hezbollah. Hezbollah's purpose of buying lands in the region is to connect the Syrian core to Bekaa up to the Jbeil District, whose capital city, Byblos, rests on the Mediterranean coast. The end goal is said to be an international highway that traverses Beirut up through the North. It also serves another vital objective for Iran, Hezbollah's primary sponsor.

Before Russia intervened, Iran used every means possible, from military operations to sectarian and confessional displacement, to connect Damascus to the Syrian coast. This was when the term "useful Syria" appeared. Following Russia's intervention and its major military base in Khmeimim, the Syrian coast came under Russian control. With the involvement of Turkey in the Euphrates Shield Operation, the fight for power in Syria intensified. Iran tightened its grip on the regions under its control, particularly in Homs and around Damascus, while maintaining its presence on the southern borders of Lebanon and Syria to pressure Israel on international issues. Still, the available facts

suggest that Iran has another purpose, which is to provide a pipeline for its gas and oil into the Mediterranean and Europe. Through this pipeline that extends from Basra to Lebanon via Homs, Tehran - already in control of Iraq's oil zone - believes it would be able to procure and sell its oil at a lower cost. Indeed, the oil pipelines have existed between Lebanon and Basra for a long time, and they are located in al-Zahrani on Lebanon's southern coast and Deir Amar on the northern coast. They only need some repairs to pump oil again.

To this end, and based on reports and a statement by an ex-Iranian, Iran seeks to control four key regions in Syria and Lebanon using demographic alteration. The latest scenes of this alteration were Zabadani and Madaya in Damascus and Kefraya and al-Fu'ah in Idlib where "Sunni residents" are to be moved from Damascus to Idlib and replaced with Shiites who will be brought in from the north. This is also what happened later, in the neighborhoods of Barza and Qabun in Damascus, where civilians and gunmen were taken out. In addition to Iran's military pressure to impose this change and reinforce its influence, Iran is betting on political compromises later on, especially in Lebanon, to win the bid for operating those pipelines. Of course, this needs more time and clearer international stances towards Iran.

This conflict takes on a sectarian character through which regions are demographically demarcated to serve political ends. All the slogans exploited by Iran in the Arab region were mostly based on religious, spiritual and national concepts, with the Palestinian cause at the top, and the support of the vulnerable, aimed at expanding Iranian spheres of influence in the region, and contributed to the conclusion of a nuclear deal with the West. All this aims at making Iran a regional power in the Middle East that aspires economic and financial expansion, achieved through its military escalation. ❖



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