

Hezbollah's Declaration of War in Syria: Military Implications

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Brief Analysis

Hezbollah's commitment to the Syrian conflict will likely change the course of the war.

On May 25, Hezbollah secretary-general Hassan Nasrallah made what amounts to a declaration of war against the Syrian revolution. He committed his group to defeating the rebellion and preserving the regime of Bashar al-Assad, declaring that "Syria is the resistance's main supporter, and the resistance cannot stand still and let *takfiris* [extremist Sunnis] break its backbone." No one can fault him for lack of clarity; this was not a speech cloaked in ambiguity. Assuming he follows through on his commitment to protect Assad's regime, both the speech and Hezbollah actions already underway in Syria could profoundly affect the war's military course, the security situation in Lebanon, and the group's military contest with Israel.

DIRECT AND INDIRECT INTERVENTION

Hezbollah's involvement in the current fighting around al-Qusayr in Homs province is its most salient action in Syria to date, but that is only part of the picture. The group has been engaged in direct military intervention in Damascus for some time, purportedly to defend the Sayyeda *Zainab* Shiite shrine in cooperation with local Shiite militiamen of the Abu al-Fadl al-Abbas Brigade. And according to rebel sources, Hezbollah members have joined regime offensives in Deraa province as well as East Ghouta in the Damascus countryside -- areas where the government is showing renewed offensive capabilities.

Hezbollah has also played a key role in the regime's development of effective irregular forces. It reportedly provides training and advice to local militia groups, Popular Committee elements, and the National Defense Army, all of which are playing a growing role in the regime's defense.

To be sure, Hezbollah's forces, even elite units, are not supermen -- even when backed with regime air, armor, artillery, and missile forces, their performance against the Syrian rebels has been less than spectacular. Hezbollah elements fighting around al-Qusayr have paid a heavy price, making slow progress on the ground but failing to

dominate rebel forces. The battle for al-Qusayr city has been underway for ten days, and the group's operations in the surrounding area have been underway for at least seven weeks. This is no blitzkrieg, and it is costing Hezbollah numerous casualties, including commanders and fighters from its best units. Nevertheless, the group's efforts have shifted the local balance of forces in the area. In combination with regular and irregular regime elements, Hezbollah's contribution will likely lead to an eventual rebel defeat there; the regime cannot lose this battle, and it will commit the forces necessary to win it.

IMPLICATIONS FOR SYRIA

Hezbollah's all-in commitment is perhaps the single most important development of the war thus far and will profoundly affect its course. Direct and significant military intervention by Hezbollah gives the regime new capabilities and restores its ability to conduct significant offensive operations. In al-Qusayr, for example, the regime can use the group's fighters as a reliable infantry force alongside its own heavy weapons and airpower. Hezbollah forces have the training and experience to conduct attacks with skill and determination, and at least so far, they have demonstrated the willingness to accept the casualties necessary to achieve their objectives -- something lacking to a degree in regime forces. Their involvement also gives the regime dependable infantry for the defense of key areas.

In addition, Hezbollah intervention reduces the burden on regime forces strained by more than two years of war. Over time, this could allow Assad to rest and redeploy some of his forces for operations elsewhere in Syria, including efforts to retake certain rebel-held areas.

Perhaps most important, Hezbollah's decision may deny the rebels a chance for overall victory. Already facing the major challenge of overcoming regime forces, the armed opposition now faces the prospect of having to defeat Hezbollah forces as well, which could be a bridge too far.

IMPLICATIONS FOR LEBANON

Nasrallah has shown once again that when the chips are down, Hezbollah will place its own interests above Lebanon's. His latest commitment has put the country's stability and the fate of his organization at risk. The Syrian war was already leaking into Lebanon before his speech, largely due to Hezbollah's increasing cross-border involvement. This led to rebel artillery strikes inside Lebanon, the mobilization of Lebanese Sunni fighters for combat in al-Qusayr, and Sunni-Shiite clashes inside Lebanon. Such problems will likely get worse in the wake of Nasrallah's declaration.

Hezbollah's Syria campaign is also exposing some longstanding illusions about the group in Lebanon and abroad. First, the group's image as the leader of the "resistance" against Israel is taking a hit. Although Nasrallah attempted to paint his decision as part of the wider struggle against Israel and the United States, the clear effect of Hezbollah actions is to kill Sunnis resisting their own government. Second, the Lebanese Armed Forces have been exposed as essentially the protectors of Hezbollah's rear areas, expected to keep the roads open while the group moves fighters into Syria at will. Third, the fighting around al-Qusayr is damaging Hezbollah's carefully maintained myth of invincibility. While its media arms speak of victories in Syria, the frequent funerals for Hezbollah members back home are difficult to ignore. The group's friends and foes in Lebanon will be watching its performance in Syria and the cost of its role there.

IMPLICATIONS FOR ISRAEL

For Israel, Hezbollah's turn to Syria could have some positive consequences. As described above, the group is already taking significant casualties, with tens killed in action and many more wounded. As its involvement deepens, many more casualties could ensue, including among senior commanders and experienced personnel. This will weaken Hezbollah, at least in the short term.

Nasrallah's decision will also distract Hezbollah from the contest with Israel. As the group's forces and resources are drawn into the Syria fight, its ability and willingness to confront Israel will be reduced. Hezbollah is in no position to fight a two-front war.

BROADER IMPLICATIONS

Hezbollah's public entry into the war adds yet another log to the fire -- the gradual expansion of combatants in Syria now includes fighters from several countries and factions. Iraqi militants have joined both sides, with some bolstering the rebels and others reportedly playing a key role in certain regime operations. Sunnis from Lebanon are fighting the regime in al-Qusayr, and rebel sources have reported the presence of Iranian combat elements in several battles despite denials from Tehran. Indeed, the war is creating a "free market" for external state and nonstate actors with an interest in the outcome and the necessary resources, and these new entrants will only energize the conflict.

Hezbollah's commitment in particular will change the equation on whatever battlefields the group fights, giving the regime renewed offensive and defensive capabilities and greater resources. It will also boost morale among the regime's forces and supporters, encouraging Assad to stay the course and crush the rebellion. As a result, the regime will be even less likely to negotiate a true transition of power, deflating the hopes of those pressing for a diplomatic solution. A regime that has shown no inclination to negotiate while losing the war will hardly be moved to compromise if it believes its prospects have improved.

Hezbollah's bold action stands in sharp contrast to the feeble response from supporters of the Syrian opposition. Without a significant upgrading of rebel capabilities -- either from their own resources, outside assistance, or both -- Nasrallah's declaration could prove decisive to the war's outcome.

Jeffrey White is a defense fellow at The Washington Institute and a former senior defense intelligence officer. ❖

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