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The party of God. Hezbollah and the conflict in Syria

by Gerben Stormbroek

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“We shall bring victory”¹. Those were the words of sheik Hassan Nasrallah, leader of Hezbollah, on 25 may 2013. Usually these words would be directed at

Israel, the sworn enemy of the Lebanese movement. But this time Nasrallah was referring to the fighting in Syria. That night Hezbollah explicitly chose to side with the Syrian government in her fight against the rebels in the ongoing civil war. Why does the Shia Islamic and pro-Iranian Hezbollah stand so firmly alongside the secular Arab nationalist regime of Bashar al-Assad? What are the consequences for Lebanon and what does the interference of Hezbollah tell us about the balance of power in the small and deeply divided neighbouring country of Syria?

Hezbollah risks a lot for getting involved in this bloody conflict. If Hezbollah loses the war siding with al-Assad this doesn't just mean a military defeat. It could possibly cause irrevocable damage to the 'good image' of Hezbollah as the great Islamic resistance movement against Israel. According to Emile Hokayem of the International Institute for Strategic Studies, Hezbollah is **putting everything on the line** with their interference in Syria. Especially after the war in 2006 against Israel, Hezbollah is held in high esteem in the Muslim world by both Sunnis and Shiites. Because of the active involvement of Hezbollah in the Syrian civil war the fights in Syria threaten to turn into a battle between the supporters of the two Islamic schools and their main representatives in the Middle East: Saudi Arabia and Iran. On a national level, the political differences in Lebanon between the pro-Syrian (pro-Assad) and anti-Syrian (anti-Assad) factions that already existed long before the war in Syria, have intensified; differences that are mostly connected to religious beliefs.

Risky interference

Hezbollah's authority in Lebanon and their military actions in Syria are becoming a source of increasing discontent to the anti-Syrian Sunnis in Lebanon. Simply put, the Sunni Muslims in Lebanon are taking sides with the anti-Syrian parties, especially since the start of the civil war in Syria,

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whereas the Shiites support the pro-Syrian parties. Christians, who take up a large part of the Lebanese population, seem to have split opinions.

On the battlefield Hezbollah has already proven its worth on the side of the Syrian regime in June this year. By sending their trained fighters to assist in the battle of Al-Qusayr, a town on the border of Syria and Lebanon, Hezbollah played a decisive role in the capture of this strategic town by troops loyal to president Assad. The regime in Damascus applauded the strategic and 'crucial' victory of Al-Qusayr. Government soldiers, rebels but also dozens of Hezbollah fighters died during the heavy fighting in Al-Qusayr. The deaths of the Hezbollah fighters didn't seem to affect the Lebanese movement, which emphasizes the pact that the movement has formed with al-Assad. "We will persevere until the end, we will take full responsibility and we will make all necessary sacrifices," Nasrallah said about his pact with Assad.

Without a doubt you can state that Hezbollah is the most powerful political movement in Lebanon right now, especially since the war against Israel in 2006. Their power has grown to the extent that it has created a state within a state. This wouldn't have been possible without the support from Syria and Iran. Nevertheless, the Iranian interest isn't the only reason why Hezbollah has intervened in Syria. The movement's history after the war against Israel in 2006 shows that Hezbollah bares its teeth when it feels threatened. Leo Kwarten, Dutch arabist and expert on Lebanon and Syria calls it pro-active defensive behaviour: "Hezbollah will never take the first blow, it will always make sure that it strikes first"².

The civil war in Syria and the possible overthrow of the Syrian government is considered very threatening by Hezbollah. Leaders of the movement have stated multiple times that they can't accept that the Takfiris (Sunni extremists), Western forces and Israel might be able to put pressure on Lebanon when their ally al-Assad is ousted from Syria. Kwarten says that Hezbollah is afraid of a new Sunni Islamic regime in Syria that wants to conclude the peace with Israel. This would also mean that the Iranian supply route for weapons gets cut off, which basically means that Hezbollah becomes isolated and surrounded by their enemies. According to Kwarten Hezbollah sees the civil war in Syria as a part of a conspiracy between Sunnis, Western forces and Israel.

Hezbollah and their connection to Syria

Iran's ideology forms the base of Hezbollah but Syria plays a different part in the movement. Apart from the fact that Syria holds an important weapon supply route for Iran, Syria has also played a big part in Hezbollah's evolution into a political movement. Where the movement started off as an armed militia, after a while it has grown into a large national movement. Within this process of change, above all, Syria is very important.

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They have a history: Bashar al-Assad and Hezbollah's Hassan Nasrallah

This country has always played an important part in Lebanon. After the annexation of the Golan Heights by Israel, after the Six-Day War in 1967, the currently ruling Ba'ath Party and the 'Assad Dynasty' of Syria say it's impossible to make peace with Israel as long as the Israeli occupation of the Golan Heights goes on. Syria avoided a direct confrontation with Israel by supporting Hezbollah, by doing so it kept the Golan-issue from falling of the international agenda. Syria has had a military presence in Syria since 1976 but in 1982 Lebanese Prime Minister Selim Al Hoss asked Syria to station troops in West Beirut. He did this to keep the fighting factions apart. Syria ensured their influence in Lebanon when in 1989 the Taif Agreement was signed. The agreement ended the Lebanese civil war. The Taif Agreement stated that Syrian troops would stay in Lebanon without making any arrangements on the departure of those troops.

After the war and the peace treaty in Taif it was very important to Syria that Hezbollah would adjust to the new situation of internal peace in Lebanon. The movement had to let go of their antagonism towards the Lebanese state, although they first wanted to overthrow it, and replace it with an Islamic state following the example of Iran. In exchange Hezbollah got official recognition as an armed resistance movement by the Lebanese government for the Jihadist activities against Israel. At that time Israel still occupied a safety zone in the southern part of the country. In addition Hezbollah would take part in political elections. The Taif Agreement said that all militias had to be disarmed but because Hezbollah was recognized as an official armed resistance against Israel they weren't included in this part of the treaty.

Hezbollah has always seen Syria as a loyal ally because of their mutual enmity towards the Jewish state. Hezbollah always regarded the Syrian presence in Lebanon as legitimate because during the Lebanese civil war the Lebanese government allowed Syria to come into their territory to let them

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help with ending the conflict.

Political instability in Lebanon

The 'special relationship' between Hezbollah and Syria has contributed to the political instability in Lebanon after the murder of former Prime Minister Rafik Hariri. On 14 February 2005 the pro-Western and anti-Syrian former prime minister was killed during a heavy bombing attack in Beirut. The assault on Hariri was very disturbing and shocking. This contributed to the fact that the elections were won by anti-Syrian parties. Under international pressure the Syrian army was forced to leave Lebanon after a presence of thirty years. This event is also known as the 'Cedar Revolution'.

Tensions have been great since then because the politically polarized environment in Lebanon is being dominated by two contradicting parties, the pro-Syrian parties connected to the 'March 8 Alliance' and the anti-Syrian parties connected to the 'March 14 Alliance'. Hezbollah is considered one of the most important groupings within the pro-Syrian bloc and both political blocs can count on the support of foreign moneylenders. As was already mentioned, Hezbollah receives a lot of support from Iran and Syria. The anti-Syrian Future Movement of Hariri's son, Saad, gets a lot of financial support from Saudi Arabia. The same relations can be seen in the Syrian civil war, where Saudi Arabia is a clear ally to the, mostly Sunni, rebels. The murdered former prime minister had a large hand in the official public service because of the financial support from Saudi Arabia and the USA.³

After the departure of Syria, Hezbollah was concerned that the Lebanese government would make decisions that would threaten the movement's continued existence. Reasons for their concerns are the decisions to disarm Hezbollah and having to cooperate with the UN tribunal to put the murderers of Hariri on trial. Some members of Hezbollah are under the suspicion of involvement in the murder. Both the disarmament and the cooperation with the tribunal are recorded resolutions by the UN Security Council.


Until this day it is still a cause for tension. Hezbollah chooses a pragmatic approach within the parliamentary order and is willing to cooperate with other groups unless the movement might be threatened. The disarmament of the movement practically means the end of Hezbollah's legitimacy. After all Hezbollah started out as an armed resistance movement against Israel but an armed resistance is worth nothing without its weapons. Furthermore Hezbollah has turned itself against the UN tribunal because its members are suspects in the murder of Hariri.

It is easy to suggest that Hezbollah is following orders from Iran, in many ways the 'father' of Hezbollah. The ideological, direct financial, and military Iranian influence on Hezbollah seems a logical explanation for the intervention of the Lebanese movement in Syria. After all, Iran is a loyal ally to al-Assad and Tehran absolutely wants to prevent the fall of his regime, for this would cut their connection to Southern Lebanon and Israel as well.

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Additionally, Iran would lose influence in the Middle East at the cost of Sunni pro-Western regimes like Saudi Arabia, its main competitor in the region. That's why Iran sent four thousand members of the Iranian Republican Guard to Syria to fight along the side of al-Assad.

But in my eyes the conclusion that Hezbollah is merely following Iranian orders is too onesided and too simple. Hezbollah is very well capable of making their own decisions: it is in its own interest that the Syrian regime wins the civil war. In many ways Iran is Hezbollah's 'father', but Assadist Syria may well be named its 'older brother', as the role Syria has had in supporting Hezbollah may well be of more influence than that of Iran.



Gerben Stormbroek is a journalist and political analyst from the Netherlands. He writes political analyses for the Netherlands Atlantic Association and the Netherlands Institute of International Relations 'Clingendael'.

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1. Hassan Nasrallah's speech, Al Manar TV, 25 May 2013
2. Interview with Leo Kwartan, June 20, 2013
3. Najib Hourani, 'Lebanon: Hybrid Sovereignties and U.S. Foreign Policy', Middle East Policy, Vol. XX, No. 1, spring 2013 ([link](#), gated)

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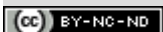
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