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Hezbollah Is Winning the War in Syria

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As the Syrian Civil War approaches its sixth year, the country has been destroyed beyond repair. Even if the international community can cobble together a negotiated settlement that brings an end to the violence, overwhelming damage has been done. Since the war began in 2011, an estimated four hundred thousand Syrians have been killed, almost five million have fled the

country and more than six million have been internally displaced. Most of Syria's major cities—including its former commercial hub Aleppo—have been reduced to rubble.

Many have lost so much in the ongoing conflict, yet some have benefited. None have gained more than the Shiite terrorist group Hezbollah.

Hezbollah is a Lebanese militia group loyal to the legacy of the Iranian Revolution. It boasts a sophisticated fighting force and even controls key seats in Lebanon's parliament. It is a prominent example of a hybrid threat, which is an insurgent or terrorist group that is able to fight—often against superior adversaries—relying on a mix of conventional and unconventional military capabilities. Hezbollah also maintains a vast social-services network throughout Lebanon that would be the envy of some small nation-states.

Led by Hassan Nasrallah, Hezbollah has long maintained ties to Iran and Syria, which effectively occupied parts of Lebanon between 1976 and 2005. For years, Syria was both a conduit through which Iran transferred weapons to Hezbollah and a place where some of its most influential leaders resided.

Hezbollah has experienced mission creep in Syria, especially as circumstances have worsened for the Assad regime in the nascent stages of the conflict. From an advise-and-assist type of role, Hezbollah fighters progressed to direct training of Syrian militias and full-fledged combat—including a ground offensive in April 2013 in Qusayr in the Homs province. In late December, Hezbollah helped the Assad regime retake Aleppo.

So why has Hezbollah sent its members to fight and die in Syria, and what has it gained?

Hezbollah has gained critical experience fighting in dense urban environments as well as familiarity with fighting against enemies much different from its long-time foe, the Israel Defense Forces. In Syria, the Shiite militia honed its capabilities in battle against various other nonstate actors, including the Islamic State. Hezbollah has perhaps been partly motivated to join the fray in Syria to counter the entrenched influence of Salafi-jihadist groups across the region, as well as their growing popularity within Lebanon. Indeed, pivoting from the group's stated *raison d'être*—countering Israel—Nasrallah has identified fighting the Islamic State as one of the chief reasons for Hezbollah's involvement in Syria.

Hezbollah will also benefit from the enlarged alliance with Syria and Iran to one that now includes Russia (the Iran-Syria-Hezbollah nexus has been referred to as “the Shiite Axis”). Indeed, U.S. officials have verified reports that Hezbollah militants have been working on the ground in tandem with not only Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps Quds Force commanders, but also with Russian special-operations troops, which is a harrowing development. As a fighting force, Hezbollah's participation in these combined operations have likely helped improve the group's interoperability with other military organizations, hone its tactics, and expand its ability to command and control forces in a combat environment—all of which can be exported back to its native Lebanon.

Last year, the Saudis cut off aid to Lebanon, further opening the door for the Iranians to consolidate their influence on an east-west axis across Iraq, Syria and Lebanon, which was much more difficult when Iraq was a dedicated enemy. The conflict has taken on elements of a proxy war and now colors every aspect of the Saudi-Iranian relationship—religious, geopolitical and economic.

Hezbollah's popular support is robust, not only in Lebanon and among Shiites, but in parts of the Arab world where Hezbollah's performance in the thirty-three-day war more than a decade ago against Israel gained it supporters from across religious lines. That support has likely ebbed (at least among Sunnis) since the conflict has taken on a more sectarian tone as it continues to drag out. As University of Maryland researcher Phillip Smyth has discussed, the Assad regime is subcontracting part of the Syrian war effort to Shiites from Afghanistan, Pakistan and parts of Central Asia.

But even as Hezbollah has prevailed in many ways, likely emerging from the Syrian Civil War as one of the few parties to cement enduring gains, it has also suffered significant losses. In four years of fighting in Syria, Hezbollah lost more fighters than it did during the entire eighteen-year Israeli occupation of southern Lebanon. Its Syria tally is approximately two thousand dead and possibly as many as six thousand wounded.

Whether the blood and treasure expended by Hezbollah and Syria will ultimately be worth it depends on two things. First, how much did Hezbollah improve as a fighting force, and will it be able to retain this competence when not actively engaged in hostilities?

Because Hezbollah enjoys sanctuary in Lebanon, it will be able to rebuild its force over time with new recruits and train them in the tactics learned in Syria, all while maintaining ties to the organizations and operatives it worked with in Syria. Although it might not have cause to engage in hostilities in the near term, it will almost certainly have improved its capacity for doing so through its experience in Syria.

Second, will Hezbollah be able to translate its battlefield acumen into domestic political power back home?

On the domestic front, Hezbollah will likely continue to succeed in portraying itself as a "resistance force" and attempt to parlay its sacrifices in Syria into political power in Lebanon. In late October, Michel Aoun, a Maronite Christian, was elected president of Lebanon's parliament, ending a two-year deadlock that kept the post vacant. He was backed in part by Hezbollah.

Most have been on the losing side of the civil war in Syria. While not unscathed, Hezbollah stands to gain momentum at home and throughout the region. Through its evolution from ragtag militia to global terrorist organization and Lebanese political party, Hezbollah has cemented its status as a power player in the Middle East.