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## Hezbollah A Clear Winner In Syrian Conflict

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While the civil war in Syria remains a grinding battle of attrition, for Hezbollah more than a year of combat has produced a new sense of purpose that extends beyond battling Israel to supporting its allies and Shiite brethren across the Middle East. And although its victories have come at a great cost in lives and resources, it has also gained the rare opportunity to display its military mettle and earn new battlefield experience. Hezbollah was founded in 1985 to fight the Israeli occupation of southern Lebanon and has since evolved into a powerful organization with a political party, a network of social services and a military force stronger than the Lebanese army. Never before have Hezbollah guerrillas fought alongside a formal army, waged war outside Lebanon or initiated broad offensives aimed at seizing territory. As a guerrilla force, it employed a hit-and-run approach in the past, bloodying the enemy without being drawn into extended conventional combat with a stronger military force. More than a year of continuous military engagement has allowed a new generation of fighters to gain battlefield experience. And to fight in Syria, the group has recruited large numbers of fighters and established accelerated training programs, according to residents of communities where Hezbollah holds sway has strengthened Hezbollah's operational ties with its regional allies.

But Hezbollah didn't expand its role in the conflict all of a sudden. Israel and the United States had known in 2012 that Assad was pressuring Hezbollah to contribute troops and reinforcements.

At that time, according to former senior US intelligence officials, Hezbollah already had forces on the ground, in a “training and assistance role” in Damascus and its suburbs, Aleppo city and Aleppo province. Iranian leaders, including Qasem Soleimani, commander of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps’ (IRGC) Quds Force, had repeatedly requested Hezbollah forces for combat in Syria, but were always refused. The main mission for which Hezbollah forces trained was the conflict with Israel, not a civil war in Syria. Hezbollah apparently only agreed to intervene in the battlefield just after a personal appeal from Iran’s supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. Ayatollah asked Hezbollah to act when Key Assad regime units had suffered dangerously high infantry casualties, and the Hezbollah fighters could help Assad replace lost capabilities with more loyal fighters than his regular troops. The Iranian-backed Lebanese militant group joined the fight in Syria publicly and earnestly in mid-2013. With thousands of experienced guerrillas and experts, the group has been instrumental in helping Assad’s overstretched forces gain ground around the capital, Damascus, and in strategic Syrian towns and villages in rugged mountains near the border with Lebanon.

Hezbollah, the Lebanese Shia armed group, played an increasingly significant role in Syria's civil war. As the conflict in Syria continues, Hezbollah’s military, economic, and geopolitical relationship with Iran’s Quds forces (a special forces of Iran’s Revolutionary Guards that deals with extraterritorial affairs) and Iran’s supreme leader is tightening. Consequently, Hezbollah’s dependence on these Iranian establishments is heightening. It is crucial to note that while Hezbollah enjoyed some amount of political independence, and carried out some policies in Lebanon or in the region in its own interests without the need for Ayatollah Khamenei’s blessings, its military and political policies have become to a great extent subject to Iran’s interest. For Iranian leaders, the Syrian war is a threat to Tehran’s national security. So Hezbollah was supposed to act and fight along side Assad. It should be remembered that one of the most powerful and extensive alliances in the Middle East, which is also known as the resistance and resilience bloc between Hezbollah, Iran, and Syria is a result of almost three decades of strategic, geopolitical, and economic investment orchestrated and guided primarily by the Islamic Republic. Hezbollah constitutes the best counter to resolutely transnational jihadist groups that are combining forces in and around Syria and gaining strength. Hezbollah’s victories in Syria are likely to bear numerous results that will emerge soon. First, President Bashar Al Assad is bound to win in the upcoming presidential election, giving him a mandate to reorganize the political agenda after the failure of Geneva I and II conferences and the retreat of the opposition on the field. Second, Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki is predicted to head the new Iraqi government. Third, the U.S.-Iranian negotiations regarding Iran’s nuclear program are expected to bear fruit in June, which would lead to redrawing the political map of the region.

But Hezbollah intervention in Syria through its military wing Islamic Resistance in Lebanon (IRL) is motivated primarily by the defense of its own interests, reflecting less an attempt to save the Syrian regime than a proactive effort to anticipate the potential impact of Assad’s fall on its ability to act in Syria. It must not be forgotten that cooperation between the Baathist regime in Damascus and Hezbollah began in the early 1990s and their strategic alliance has consisted essentially of Syria’s facilitating the transfer of arms from Iran to Hezbollah which is crucial for Hezbollah to maintain a huge arsenal of Iranian rockets and missiles. The other reason which forced Hezbollah was the pressure of the Shia community of South Lebanon from which it gets major support base. The majority of Shiites have strong hostility towards the Sunni jihadist

groups in the Syrian opposition. Christians are not the only religious group anxious about their growing importance. Shiites feel much the same fear because they know that the hatred directed by these groups at them is based more on religious than on political differences that is, they are hated for what they are, rather than for what they think. So this fear also forced Hezbollah to act militarily to secure its own home basion. Hezbollah success on the Syrian battlefield in chasing rebels from the border towns where many of the attacks on Shitte community of Lebanon originated. The bombings have since stopped, leaving Lebanon's Shiites grateful for Hezbollah's intervention and luring a new wave of aspiring young fighters to the group's training camps. Moreover, these accomplishments of Hezbollah have also sparked a revival of communal identity, based on a new "Shiite pride.