

Hezbollah: A game changer in Syria

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“Events in al-Qusayr are a transformation on the scope of the region's strategies, and Syria has entered a new phase that is not in 'Israel's' and U.S.'s favor.” – Deputy Head of Hezbollah Executive Board Sheikh Nabil Qaouk.¹

In a decisive triumph over U.S. and Zionist backed rebel forces, Hezbollah resistance fighters aided by the Syrian Army have repatriated the formerly insurgent-controlled city of Qusayr. The victory was conceded on Wednesday, June 5 by the (Persian) Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC)-supplied jihadists after a 3-week long siege by government-allied forces for control of the strategic city.²

Qusayr, located in western Syria, was one of the first cities occupied by the overwhelmingly Sunni Syrian rebels back in March of 2011. The strategic value of the town, which is just 10 kilometers from the Lebanese border, lies in the fact that it serves as a logistics gateway between Lebanon and Syria for the flow of weapons and supplies to insurgents.³ The triumphant recapture of Qusayr by Syrian-led forces has provided new momentum in the Assad administration's fight against foreign-backed militants and has shown the “potentially game-changing role” played by Hezbollah in the bloody conflict dubbed the Syrian Civil war⁴ by the western media and an international global attack on Syria by President Bashar al-Assad.

Hezbollah Secretary General Sayyid Hassan Nasrullah had reminded the al-Qaida-linked insurgents in Syria about their assurances to respect holy places in Syria after members of Jabhat al-Nusra claimed responsibility for the destruction of the shrine of the companion of the Prophet (S) Hujr ibn ‘Adi al-Kindi in May. He warned the insurgents of “serious repercussions” should there be any damage to the shrine of Lady Zaynab or any of the other numerous holy sites in the strife-stricken country.⁵

As a result of Hezbollah's pivotal role in ousting rebels from Qusayr, the GCC, whose members include the western-aligned dictatorial monarchies of Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, is contemplating a move to place the Lebanese resistance organization on their “terrorist list.” The regime in Bahrain has already outlawed any contact by Bahraini opposition groups with Hezbollah, which the Saudi-supported dictator, Hamid ibn ‘Issa Al Khalifa, has already labeled as “terrorist.”⁶ Parroting western reactions, Minister of Interior Lt. General Rashid bin Abdullah Al Khalifa has ordered an investigation “to examine possible Hezbollah activity” within Bahrain.⁷

Elsewhere in the Arab world, the defensive intervention by Hezbollah into Syria against the foreign-backed insurgency has been the target of criticism.⁸ Qatar-based Salafi cleric Yusuf al-Qaradawi has called for a Sunni jihad against Hezbollah. “Every Muslim trained to fight and capable of doing that (must) make himself available,” said al-Qaradawi in Doha on Friday May 31st.⁹ General Salim Idriss, the so-called chief of staff of the rebel Supreme Military Council, warned that he would not be able to restrain his insurgents. Not mincing any words, he declared,

“We will chase Hezbollah to hell.” Even moderate clerics from the Muslim Scholars Association of Lebanon are now calling upon followers to aid the Syrian insurgency.¹⁰

The reaction in the west was predictable. Defense Minister Moshe Ya’alon said “Israel” would not respond to Hezbollah’s engagement in Syria “as long as it doesn’t hurt our interest – such as transfer of advanced weapons, missiles, chemical weapons ... or escalating the theater,”¹¹ which is not surprising considering the stunning defeat Hezbollah inflicted upon the Zionists in 2006. UN Envoy to Syria Lakhdar Brahimi indicated that the peace talks scheduled for mid- June in Geneva have now been postponed until July.¹² British Prime Minister David Cameron is now pushing to allow the direct arming of the Syrian rebels despite fears by MPs of an Iraq replay scenario.¹³ White House Press Secretary Jay Carney said, “We remain very concerned, and we condemn in the strongest possible terms the Assad regime's assault on Qusayr. ... It is clear that the regime is unable to contest the opposition's control of a place like Qusayr on their own, and that is why they are dependent on Hezbollah and Iran to do their work for them.”¹⁴

What Mr. Carney and most westerners fail, or perhaps refuse, to grasp is the strategic significance of Hezbollah’s defensive mission in Syria, and the plurality of support – 70% according to NATO data – enjoyed by the al-Assad government.¹⁵ “With Bashar al-Assad's regime on the brink of collapse,” writes one U.S. scholar associated with the influential Council on Foreign Relations, Hezbollah has entered into Syria over fears that it “stands to lose a close ally.” The same scholar goes on to make the absurd charge that the resistance movement’s involvement in the Syrian crisis demonstrates that it has taken on a “sectarian agenda,” which will result in “imperiling Hezbollah and likely marking the end of Lebanon’s relative stability.”¹⁶ Strangely enough, no similar comment was made by the scholar on the destabilizing effect that western support for the Salafi militants in Syria has had on Lebanon and the region in general.

Michael Young, editor of the Lebanese Daily Star, on the other hand, has a clearer view of the situation on the ground in Syria than the scholars in the west. Acknowledging that the insurgents are losing ground in Syria, he stated, “The United States has been embarrassed, and Russia and Iran's approach [to the Syria crisis] has been validated.” Continuing, he observed, “This is a dire time for the Syrian opposition. We could be at a turning point in the war against the Assad regime. Russia and Iran stuck with Assad, while the Obama administration has spent two years fiddling about and issuing empty statements without a clear strategy.” As for the reason behind Hezbollah’s decision to enter into the Syrian conflict, Young explained that it was essential for the resistance movement to defend itself against an “alliance between the takfiris (extremists), the Salafis, jihadists (Sunni extremists), the United States, and Israel.”¹⁷

Before the Syrian government’s Hezbollah-spearheaded success in Qusayr, President Obama had expressed vague concern over the resistance movement’s “active and growing role in Syria, fighting on behalf of the Assad regime” in a phone conversation with Lebanese President Sleiman.¹⁸ Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, seeing the Syrian situation from a more nuanced perspective, said emphatically, “The international community has to decide with whom it will stand by in Syria. With those who want 'forced regime change' or those who want to resolve the crisis through dialogue.”¹⁹

After a recent trip to the Middle East to meet with heads of state and the “Syrian Opposition,” U.S. Senator John McCain, underscoring ambiguous U.S. policy towards Syria, declared, “The only power that is not fully committed in this region is us.”²⁰ Commenting on this apparent American policy vacillation, Ali Rizk, Beirut bureau chief for Press TV, speculated that the U.S. position on Syria might actually be shifting towards that of Russia in calling for a negotiated political settlement.²¹

Avoiding a definitive statement on the Obama administration’s response to the latest developments in Syria now that Hezbollah is clearly in the picture, White House Press Secretary Carney, when pressed for answers by reporters, said that he thought the use of chemical weapons by the Assad government – rather than Hezbollah’s open involvement – would be what the U.S. president would consider a “game changer.”²² However, despite recent reports alleging that Obama had asked the U.S. military to develop plans for a no-fly zone over Syria, Pentagon officials denied that the U.S. president had made any such request.²³

In any event, if Washington still remains fuzzy about what its policy should be towards Syria, and the recent victory at Qusayr was insufficient to qualify as a game changer in Obama’s opinion, then perhaps he should have someone in his regime pick up the phone and consult with Tehran for further clarification and advice.

Endnotes

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