

Lebanese Hezbollah's Continuing Gamble

Dr. Imad K. Harb

May 4, 2015

As the military landscape changes in favor of anti-regime nationalist and extremist forces in Syria's north and south, it is premature to declare the nearing of the end of the Syrian civil war. President Bashar al-Assad can still count on latent resilience, seeming Alawite solidarity, outside support, and outright hubris. Importantly, he can continue to heavily rely on elite units of the Lebanese Hezbollah which has mortgaged its fate and domestic prestige in an unwarranted gamble to support what it calls an essential pillar of the 'resistance front.'



Qalamoun and surrounding areas

News reports today indicate that Hezbollah is in a pitched battle with the Syrian al-Qaeda-affiliated al-Nusra Front in what the party believes will be a decisive campaign to secure regime-held areas north of the capital Damascus and abutting the northeastern Lebanese border. The Syrian Qalamoun Mountains are an extension of Lebanon's eastern mountain range, form a rugged line of defense for Hezbollah-controlled areas in Lebanon and inside Syria, and protect a north-south supply-line for Damascus from

the city of Homs and Alawite areas to its west.

Specifically, Hezbollah seeks to end al-Nusra's three-year presence in the Qalamoun Mountains from which it launched cross-border incursions and attacks after the party committed itself to the defense of Assad's regime. The millennial Islamic State has also been found to control some sectors of its own. Recapturing the area has thus become a major Hezbollah objective to defend its geographic depth and protect Damascus from being cut off from the regime's strongholds.

The Gamble Continues...

Hezbollah's gamble, now in its third year, to support the Assad regime militarily continues to put Lebanon in jeopardy. Acting as a state within a state, the Party of God has robbed the Lebanese state of its authority to chart the country's foreign policy. It has ignored the 2012 Baabda Declaration that emerged from a national dialogue convened by former President Michel Suleiman and in which the party participated. In a declared policy of 'dissociation,' official Lebanon was to be neutral in the Syrian conflict in the hope that the country would be spared domestic turmoil and political discord.

By ignoring the Baabda Declaration, Hezbollah also forced the Lebanese armed forces and security services to become indirectly involved in the Syrian civil war when al-Nusra and the Islamic State (more the former) launched attacks inside Lebanon to retaliate against Hezbollah interference in Syria. Al-Nusra Front and the Islamic State see the Syrian conflict through a sectarianism prism and Hezbollah's support of the Syrian regime as justification for attacking multi-sectarian Lebanon. Their and their sympathizers' attacks on the border and

inside the country have killed and maimed hundreds of Lebanese soldiers, policemen, and civilians since 2012. They also continue to hold scores of other soldiers and police personnel hostage. Last week, IS surrendered the remains of a Lebanese soldier and a civilian it had held for months and later killed in what is believed to be a psychological war of attrition with Lebanese authorities.

Moreover, Hezbollah's participation in Syria has actually resulted in further political polarization inside Lebanon between those advocating the dissociation policy and those blindly supporting the status quo. The disagreements regarding Syria have helped to paralyze political life and prevented the arrival at crucial decisions regarding institutional continuity, especially the election of a new president after Suleiman's term ended in May of 2014. According to the Lebanese Constitution, executive authority is now in the hands of a weak cabinet headed by Prime Minister Tammam Salam and threatened with disunity and ineffectiveness. Political factions in the cabinet and the Parliament cannot even agree on candidates for leadership positions in the military and security services and other executive agencies and judicial bodies. Meanwhile, the country's social fabric is subjected to the deep detrimental impact of about 1.6 million legal and illegal Syrian refugees (making up 35 percent of those living there) who no one believes will be able to return to their homes for years to come.

...As the Syrian Regime Crumbles

Hezbollah's continuing to count on the strength and resilience of the Syrian regime no doubt rests upon an optimistic assessment of conditions on the ground in Syria conveniently conducted by Iranian observers.

According to this assessment, the regime is capable of endlessly replenishing its forces with fresh recruits, equipment, and munitions. It is able to defend, hold, and actually re-capture territory. Its air force is unmatched and President Bashar al-Assad enjoys wide popular support. The only course is thus to continue to send in more fighters, equipment, and supplies.



Undated photo of Hezbollah fighter in Qalamoun

However, what this assessment misses are clear signs of retreat, gradual collapse, and Iranian re-calculations. After more than four years of mobilization, active combat, and tens of thousands of casualties, the Syrian army and paramilitary forces are showing clear signs of battle fatigue on all fronts. In the south, opposition forces have scored impressive victories and have ended regime presence along the Jordanian border. In the north, and except for some militarily insignificant outposts close to the Turkish border, the regime has lost Idlib Province and the city of Jisr ash-Shughour that defended the northeastern access to Latakia Province, one of Assad's Alawite strongholds. Opposition forces are also increasing the pressure on the regime around the cities of Aleppo and Hama while Damascus itself is not immune, despite Hezbollah's investment of its strategic forces in its defense.

There also appear to be cracks in regime ranks. General Rustum Ghazaleh, chief of the Political Intelligence Directorate and king maker in Lebanon before 2005, has recently mysteriously died after a confrontation with General Rafiq Shehadeh, chief of the Military Intelligence Directorate. His death was ignored by the Syrian News Agency SANA but only announced by al-Mayadeen, a pro-Syrian television station in Beirut, and his funeral was held two weeks ago in Damascus without much fanfare. Shehadeh himself is reported to have been fired by President Assad after the fight. In Beirut, some newspapers and anti-Syrian politicians commented that Ghazaleh was eliminated so that he could not testify in front of the International Tribunal for Lebanon at The Hague investigating the 2005 assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq al-Hariri, in which Syrian intelligence and members of Hezbollah are said to be involved.



Syrian soldiers in Qalamoun

In addition, the general retreat of regime forces since their 2013 resurgence after Hezbollah threw in its full support is compounded by what appears to be a new Iranian re-calculation of the Islamic Republic's policy in Syria. Lebanon's premier Arabic-language newspaper an-Nahar reported the failure of a March visit by

Syrian Defense Minister General Fahd Jassem al-Frej to Tehran in which there were clear differences in strategic priorities between Syria and Iran. An-Nahar reported that al-Frej complained about the withdrawal of Iraqi Shiite militiamen from Syria to help fight the Islamic State in Iraq without coordination with Damascus. General Qassem Sulaimani, Commander of the Quds Force in the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps, also advised al-Frej to concentrate on the southern front and link the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights with southern Lebanon, a linkage that to the Syrian regime would draw in Israel at a very inappropriate time. Sulaimani also advised withdrawing some regime forces from around Damascus and deploying them to defend Alawite areas. These differences in strategy were indeed reflected by pro-Syrian commentators in Beirut who complained about leaving the Syrian regime exposed and demoralized, a clear reference that Iran no longer seems to be committed to the survival of the Syrian regime or al-Assad himself.

The Possibilities Ahead

It is hard now to see what Hezbollah's current military confrontation in Qalamoun is likely to produce, but there are some possibilities that could be conjectured at this point.

First, and as the afore-mentioned an-Nahar report speculates, there obviously is the possibility that it could turn into a stalemate and a war of attrition that could drag the Lebanese army into a fight it did not plan to join if and when Syrian opposition forces try to relieve Hezbollah pressure on their positions.

Second, members sympathetic to al-Nusra and the Islamic State in Lebanon may take it upon themselves to attack Hezbollah areas of

support in order to distract its forces in Syria or force them to retreat. That will most likely result in a sectarian conflagration in Lebanon that will re-ignite the long-dormant civil war.

Third, Hezbollah and regime forces may simply fail to dislodge the opposition which is likely to lead to more defeats in regime-held areas. If that were to transpire, it is likely that hundreds of thousands of Alawites will flood into Lebanon seeking refuge along with others already there, thus jeopardizing Lebanon's social peace for the foreseeable future.

Images accessed May 4, 2015

The Qalamoun area

<http://www.kataeb.org/files/images/featured/syria/syria-qalamoun-map.jpg>

Hezbollah fighter in Qalamoun

http://www.dailystar.com.lb/dailystar/Pictures/2015/05/04/414015_img650x420_img650x420_crop.jpg

Syrian Soldiers in Qalamoun

http://www.dailystar.com.lb/dailystar/Pictures/2015/03/20/400827_img650x420_img650x420_crop.jpg