



## Hezbollah's risky gamble in Syria

Earth Thought Notebooks

Chef de bataillon BIED-CHARRETON

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**In May 2013, Hezbollah publicly acknowledged its military aid to the Syrian regime of Bashar al-Assad. This military intervention outside its borders earned it national and international blacklisting. The purpose of this study is to analyse the reasons that led Hezbollah to take what appears to be a very dangerous decision, as well as the reasons that allow it to benefit today from its involvement in Syria.**

In September 2012, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan declared that his prayer in the Great Umayyad Mosque in Damascus and his visit to Saladin's tomb were imminent[1]. 1] He was thus betting, not without a morgue, on a rapid fall of President al-Assad's Syrian regime as a result of the civil war that had broken out the previous year. However, at the end of 2016, the position of Bashar al-Assad was, on the contrary, consolidated to the point that its durability seemed to be one of the conditions now essential for the eradication of the Islamic state. Many Western observers did not see, as early as 2011, to what extent the combined support of Russia and Iran would allow the Damascus regime to continue. However, among the supporters of Bashar el-Assad, the action of the Lebanese Hezbollah should not be neglected.

However, an objective understanding of the nature of the "Party of God's" commitment in Syria is complex; it is necessary to first recall what it is about:

- That Hezbollah is not a political party with a military branch; it must be considered structurally as the political arm of a military organization, the Military Resistance in Lebanon[2] (RIL), which is its *raison d'être*[3];
- That the adjective "military" no longer corresponds (only) to the organization's "classical" terrorist methods since the 1980s; it does indeed cover the existence of a real "army", which, although it is not a regular army, nonetheless practices conventional combat;
- That while it is often reduced to a submarine from Tehran, which provides its material support, Hezbollah today wants to be fully "Lebaneseised" and has a

certain autonomy vis-à-vis Iran. It draws its legitimacy locally from its formidable power of mobilisation which accompanies the growth of the Shiite portion of the Lebanese population [4].

4] Thus, studying the commitment of the Islamic resistance in Lebanon, a confessional and non-conventional army, beyond its national borders, amounts to analysing the forces that allowed Hezbollah to take a decision that was the most dangerous over time, and to legitimise it beyond accusations of politico-religious solidarity.

However, Hezbollah's decision to intervene on Syrian soil is a success because it allows the party in retrospect to appear as the powerful protector of Lebanese territory.

Indeed, if the decision to intervene in Syria seems to have been a choice of reason, it was nonetheless one of the most difficult to assume politically. Hezbollah is now emerging strengthened.

Thus, in 2012, the choice of Hezbollah to intervene in Syria is a choice of reason. This decision is taken because the party's interests are threatened there in the short term, while it has a military tool enabling it to engage beyond national borders. However, this intervention remains clandestine so as not to bear the political cost of this decision.

Indeed, from the first days of the anti-Assad agitation in March 2011, Hassan Nasrallah[5] recognised the party's preference for the ruling party, which he described as "the party of the day". of "regime of resistance against Israel", while calling for a negotiated solution, fearing the importation of violence on Lebanese soil [6]. 6] Hezbollah's support for its traditional ally appears natural; the Damascus regime also participates in its financing. 7] However, Hezbollah is also linked to Damascus by a strategic alliance concluded in the early 1990s, the main aim of which is to facilitate the transport of RIL weapons from Iran through Syrian territory. The accession to power of the Sunni rebels of the Free Syrian Army (LSA) would necessarily call these logistical facilities into question. Moreover, the Lebanese Sunni Bekaal[8] serves as a refuge zone for these same Syrian rebels, at the gates of the Hermel region, a key area for Hezbollah. Thus, far from being motivated by simple political and religious motives, the aid provided by Hezbollah to the Damascus regime will be based above all on the defence of its own short-term interests.

Moreover, the RIL's intervention in Syria would have been impossible had it not succeeded in transforming itself, which began in the early 1990s, into a "regular" army. This progress is at the origin of the convincing tactical results obtained against the IDF in southern Lebanon in 2000 and again in the summer of 2006 [9]. 9] As Elias Hanna, a retired Lebanese Army General and professor at the American University of Beirut, states: "In 2006, Hezbollah was waging a guerrilla war. Today, it is like a conventional army" [10]. 10] The training, equipment and training of the RIL, supported by Iran and Syria, have made it possible to build up an army whose strength is now close to 30,000 men. Hezbollah's arsenal would also include nearly 100,000 missiles and rockets [11]. 11] Engagement beyond national borders will both sanction and accelerate this evolution of the RIL.

Consequently, the first phase of the Syrian civil war sees Hezbollah's participation in the conflict, as of 2012, in an unofficial form. This attitude corresponds to a desire to keep an official distance from Syrian affairs. Indeed, the intervention of the RIL fighters in support of the Damascus regime would not fail to trigger the combined hostile reactions of its national political adversaries, in the first place the "alliance of 14 March" [12], like those of the Sunnis of the Syrian opposition, with the very real fear of a contamination of the civil

war on Lebanese territory in the background. Rumours and unverified information mention in particular the projection in Syria of "Unit 910", an elite unit of the RIL, commanded by Mustapha Badreddine, supposedly the military leader of Hezbollah in Syria [13]. 13] Testimonies of fighting involving Hezbollah self-defence groups against Syrian rebels in the border region are reported, immediately attributed by Hassan Nasrallah to private initiatives.

However, while Hezbollah's presence in the Syrian theatre is less and less discreet, Nasrallah finally acknowledges a "defensive" intervention by the party in the Syrian civil war. At the same time, he assumes the risks of destabilization of Lebanon, such as the blacklisting of Hezbollah.

Thus, at the end of May 2013, a few kilometres north of the Lebanese Bekaa, 6,000 soldiers of the Syrian army, reinforced by the Iranian Pasdarans and 2,000 Hezbollah fighters [14], laid siege to the city of Qousseir, which had fallen into the hands of the rebellion the previous year. The intervention of RIL units appears to be the factor that allowed the regime's forces to win the decision[15]. The scale of Hezbollah's deployment no longer makes it possible to deny its presence in Syria. Also, on the occasion of this first victory of a strategic nature,[16] Nasrallah officially recognised the commitment of the Islamic resistance alongside the troops of Bashar El-Assad. The argument invoked is that of a defense "far" from the territory in the face of rebel attacks on Shiite positions indiscriminately Syrian and Lebanese. In fact, Hezbollah's interventions will initially concentrate, in Syria, on cities close to the Lebanese Shiite Bekaa. This purely defensive vision is still recalled by Nasrallah in May 2016, when his forces took part in the siege of Aleppo: "We went to Syria to defend Lebanon and we are aware of the consequences of this choice" [17].

17] However, in Lebanon, this speech obviously does not convince the "coalition of 14 March" which has been accusing Hezbollah of endangering the security of its country of origin since the beginning of the conflict. In this respect, the Sunni reactions appear to reveal the resentment felt by this community against Hezbollah since the end of the 2008 conflict [18]. Moreover, Syrian rebels, like the Syrian branch of al-Qa'ida, have been threatening since 2012 the party they have renamed "party of the devil" [19] with reprisals on Lebanese soil. However, following the fighting in Qousseir, a first car bomb attack killed 27 people on 15 August in the suburbs of Beirut. Six days later, Tripoli, the Sunni capital of northern Lebanon, was hit by a double attack that left more than 40 people dead and 450 wounded. In this context of conflagration, Hassan Nasrallah reiterated his position that Hezbollah should intervene militarily in Syria to protect Lebanese territory. He calls for the conflict not to be "confessionalized" and seeks to give pledges to the Sunnis, blaming the attacks on "radicals among the Sunnis". However, while Hezbollah is registering significant losses on the ground[21], the positioning of the party leader appears to be very delicate.

Moreover, Hezbollah's involvement in Syria has other, more symbolic consequences on the international level. Indeed, the United States, having officially classified Hezbollah as a terrorist organisation in 1997, has never ceased, with its Israeli ally, to plead for wider recognition of this qualification by the international community. However, the European Union had always refused to do so, since France had vetoed it, a position that was all the more understandable given its presence on Lebanese territory within the framework of UNIFIL. However, at the end of May 2013, following the battle of Qousseir and the officialization of the aid provided by the RIL to the Syrian forces, the French Minister of Foreign Affairs, Laurent Fabius, announced a reversal on this point on the grounds that the movement was "not only fully committed in Syria but (...) it has also claimed its

commitment" [22]. The decision to place "the military wing of Hezbollah" [23] on the EU list of terrorist organisations was taken unanimously on 22 July 2013. This decision, welcomed by the 14 March alliance, provoked the incomprehension of a large part of the Lebanese press as well as officials [24]. 24] In practice, this international blacklisting will have little effect on the party's room for manoeuvre.

25] Now, after four years of costly engagement outside its borders in Syria, Hezbollah seems to have succeeded in its wager: by pursuing its own objectives, it has asserted itself as a credible regional military power, while strengthening its political base in Lebanese society.

On the other hand, at the national level, Hezbollah's involvement in Syria has made it possible to consolidate the party's hold on the Shiites. Indeed, from the first reprisals by Sunni jihadists against the Lebanese population, which culminated in the attacks of 12 November 2015,[29] many specialists have wagered on a collapse of Hezbollah's popularity, thinking that the Shiite base would necessarily dissociate itself from it. However, the opposite phenomenon occurred since, faced with the Lebanese state's inability to guarantee collective security, the Shiites rallied around the only actor capable of protecting it, Hezbollah. While Hassan Nasrallah's initial reactions to the Syrian conflict, calling for negotiations in 2011, had dented his prestige among the Shiites of the region, his popularity is now at its peak. In the summer of 2015, a survey conducted among the Shiite community revealed that 78.7% of its members supported Hezbollah's involvement in Syria [30], while 79.9% considered that the party's action contributed to their security. Indeed, Hezbollah's engagement in Syria represents an operational success that gives credibility to its military apparatus. The highest hypotheses put forward the figure of 7,000 Islamic resistance fighters projected in Syria. Under Iranian impetus, the armament of Hezbollah fighters now includes some of the most sophisticated equipment, such as the fourth generation of Kornet remote-controlled anti-tank missiles. 26] The RIL also uses surveillance drones. The Syrian experience has above all enabled Hezbollah to train its troops in joint combat, combining foot and armoured manoeuvres with the use of artillery. As a result, many observers now consider Hezbollah to be a regional military power of the first order, whose capabilities are of the greatest concern to Israel [27]. 27] Its experience and training are increasingly overshadowing the Lebanese armed forces. The military parade organised by Hezbollah in the Syrian symbolic city of Qousseir on 15 November 2016 [28] serves as an impressive demonstration of its new capabilities, especially in the direction of Israel, at a time when an ally of the party, General Aoun, is taking over the Lebanese presidency.

Nevertheless, the biggest of Hezbollah's political victories is certainly to have succeeded in transcending the cleavages in order to appear temporarily as a true protector of Lebanon. The process of "Lebaneseisation" of the party, undertaken by Nasrallah since 1992 [31], has indeed come to a halt with the decision to intervene in Syria, interpreted by its detractors as a simple political-confessional obedience to Tehran. However, Lebanese Christians living in the Bekaa have benefited from Hezbollah's action on the country's borders, saving them from persecution by Jabhat al-Nusra and then by the Islamic state. The attack by the latter on the Lebanese town of Ersal in August 2014 revealed the reality of the danger they posed to the security of Lebanon. Above all, the deterioration of the Syrian situation and the involvement of the Islamic state legitimized a posteriori the intervention of Hezbollah in Syria, including for some of the Christians of the 14 March alliance, worried about the installation in Damascus of a Sunni power [32]. 32] Thus, the Maronite patriarch Monsignor Bechara al-Rai, initially critical of the Syrian adventures of Hezbollah, conceded, as an aside, in 2014: "The Christians know that without Hezbollah,

the Islamic State would have reached Jounieh" [33][34].

With a degree in history and a diploma from EDHEC, the BIED-CHARRETON Battalion Commander is recruited on title in Saint-Cyr (promotion "General Simon", 2003-2006). As an infantryman, he served successively in the 7th<sup>BCA</sup>, the 1st RI, then as an officer dealing with the G35/World of the EMOT. Laureate of the 2015 competitive examination of the École de Guerre, he started in September 2016 a schooling in Arabic at the National Institute of Oriental Languages and Civilizations (INALCO).

Thus, whatever the outcome of the Syrian civil war, it seems that Hezbollah's decision to intervene in this conflict is already benefiting him. In the long run, the maintenance of Bashar al-Assad would strengthen it, but the Lebanese base of the party guarantees it, in any case, to survive the Damascus regime. He now appears to be at the heart of the Lebanese political game, while at the regional level, his new military capabilities represent a most worrying threat to Israel.

1] Sami Kleib, quoted by Majed Nehme in Syria: Why hasn't the regime fallen ? Africa Asia, April 2015

[2] al-Muqawama

3] Which "resistance" continued beyond the liberation of the south of the country in 2000, which was its original objective. Aurélie Daher, "Le **Hezbollah**", PUF Proche Orient, 2014

4] It should be noted in this regard that he uses Islam primarily as a means to achieve temporal goals and does not a priori advocate the Islamization of society.

5] Emblematic leader of Hezbollah (general secretary of the party since 1992), he draws his popularity in Lebanon in part from the Israeli withdrawal from the south of the country in 2000. His eldest son died in fighting against the IDF in 1997.

6] Nada Bakri, "Hezbollah leader backs Syrian president in public", New York Times, 7 December 2011.

7] Source: Council of Foreign Relations cfr.org

8] The Bekaa plain is a valley in the eastern part of Lebanon, bordered on the west by Mount Lebanon and on the east by the Anti-Lebanon.

9] Battalion Chief Roméo François, "Hezbollah: a militia turned into an armed force", CDEC

10] Quoted by William Booth in "Ten years after last Lebanon war, Israel warns next one will be far worse", The Washington Post, July 23, 2016.

11] For example, Hezbollah fired 4,000 shots at Israel in August 2006.

12] This bloc bringing together various Christian and Sunni parties was born out of opposition to Syrian interference in Lebanon in the context of the Cedar Revolution in 2005; as of 2011, it is logically pro-Western, pro-Saudi and anti-Assad. It is opposed to the predominantly Shia-dominated coalition known as the "March 8" coalition, which is pro-Syrian and pro-Iranian.

13] Potential replacement for Imad Moughniyah as military leader of Hezbollah, assassinated in Damascus in 2008. Baddredine himself died in Damascus in March 2016, apparently in a bombing attack.

14] By way of comparison, during the Israeli offensive against Lebanon in the summer of 2006, Hezbollah mobilized between 2,500 and 5,000 men.

15] "Syria and Hezbollah bolster forces in Qusayr", Al Jazeera, 29 May 2013.

# Pensées mili-terre

## Centre de doctrine et d'enseignement du commandement

16| It made it possible to pacify a large part of the border between Syria and Lebanon and to open a road between Damascus and the Syrian coast.

17| On the occasion of Mustapha Baddredine's funeral: "Nasrallah: Badreddine's blood will impel us to strengthen our presence in Syria", L'Orient - Le Jour, May 20, 2016.

18| The Lebanese conflict of 2008 saw the opposition, mainly in Beirut, of the March 14 and March 8 blocs, and ended with a political victory for Hezbollah.

19| "Hizbal-Shaytan".

20| The first attack is claimed by a Sunni group of the Syrian opposition. The second could be a response to the first (of the Syrian regime?) as it could be the work of the same perpetrators with the aim of escalation.

21| Estimates range from a few hundred to as many as 1,500 men since 2012 in Syria.

22| "Paris wants to put the military wing of Hezbollah on the EU list of terrorist groups," Le Monde, 23 May 2013. The other motive invoked is the attack in Bourgas, Bulgaria, against a busload of Israeli tourists on 18 July 2012, attributed to Hezbollah; a case that has not yet been judged.

23| Inappropriate terminology (see introduction).

24| All the more so since France supports Jubhat al-Nusra, affiliated with al-Qaeda, and against which Hezbollah is fighting in Syria. Laurent Fabius also opposed the United States' inclusion of "JAN" on its list of terrorist organisations: "Pression militaire et succès diplomatique pour les rebelles syriens" (Military pressure and diplomatic success for Syrian rebels), Le Monde, 13 December 2012.

25| Aurélie Daher, "[25] Aurélie Daher, Libération, 25 May 2016. Hezbollah", PUF Near East, 2014.

26| AT14 SPRIGGAN (NATO), missiles first used by the RIL in the summer of 2006 against Israel, and supplied by Iran to Hamas during the Gaza war of 2014.

27| "Teny years after last Lebanon war, Israel warns next one will be far worse", The Washington Post, 23 July 2016.

28| Hezbollah exhibited T72 tanks, M113 armoured vehicles and KS-12A anti-aircraft guns on this occasion.

29| 41 deaths in Beirut, attacks claimed by the Islamic state, quickly eclipsed in France by those of 13 November.

30| "15 questions for the Lebanese Shia Community", Shiawatch.com, July 2015.

31| It is a question of appearing as an autonomous actor vis-à-vis Iran. Colonel Michel Goya and Marc-Antoine Brillant, "[31] It is a question of appearing as an autonomous actor vis-à-vis Iran. Israel against Hezbollah: Chronicle of a defeat foretold" Editions du Rocher, 2013.

32| "Quand le Hezbollah conforte en Syrie ses positions au Liban", Aurélie Daher, Libération, 25 May 2016.

33| Coastal city north of Beirut.

34| Al-Safir, 7 October 2014.

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