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## Lebanese group Hizbollah hints at support for Syria's Assad

By Abigail Fielding-Smith in Beirut



When the leader of Hizbollah, the Lebanese militant group, discussed Syria's "real friends" in a televised speech, he took a step towards declaring the Shia movement's involvement in the country's two-year-old conflict.

Opponents of Bashar al-Assad, Syria's president, allege that the organisation, which is allied to Damascus and Tehran, is helping the regime suppress the rebellion.

Hizbollah supporters portray their role as much more limited than this, but on Tuesday night Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah implicitly acknowledged the logic of this alliance.

"Syria has real friends, in the region and the world, that will not let it fall into the hands of America, Israel and takfiri [Sunni extremist] groups," he said in the speech on Tuesday.

In some ways, this statement comes as no surprise to anyone in the region. Mr Assad provides Hizbollah with a vital arms transit route, and is an ally in whom the group's Iranian patrons, proponents of the so-called 'axis of resistance' against Israel, have also invested heavily. A Sunni leadership in Syria, backed by Iran's enemies in the Gulf, would alter the balance of power in the Levant, while the growing presence of Sunni extremists there potentially poses a threat to Hizbollah on its own turf.

Nonetheless, Hizbollah is keen to avoid domestic blowback from the Syria conflict and until now has rarely used such strong language.

Mohamad Chatah, a member of Lebanon's mainly Sunni Future party, argues that from Hizbollah's point of view the benefits of such a declaration of intent outweigh the costs, coming as it does at a time when the US is debating deeper involvement with the Syrian rebels.

"It was aimed at all those who believe they can win in Syria," he says. "It was a psychological message that trying to defeat the regime will lead to wider and more devastating regional conflict."

Another factor behind Mr Nasrallah's speech is the death toll of Hizbollah fighters in Syria.

The exact scope of Hizbollah's current involvement in Syria remains unclear. Hizbollah supporters have previously admitted that men affiliated with the group have been fighting in Shia villages near the Lebanese border, while rebels say they are playing a more offensive role. But reports are increasing of funerals in Shia towns in Lebanon.

Mr Nasrallah simultaneously acknowledged and played down the issue, insisting that Hizbollah had never sought to hide its martyrs, but arguing that the media had exaggerated their number.

He pledged however to "take all the necessary actions" to defend Lebanese in Shia villages in the Qusair region on the Syrian side of the border.

Another component of Hizbollah's Syria policy is the Shia shrine in Sayida Zeinab south of Damascus.

In Tuesday's speech, Mr Nasrallah warned of "serious repercussions" if it was destroyed by rebels.

The group's opponents say it is using the shrine as a pretext to justify intervention in Syria. Whether contrived or not, raising the spectre of its destruction seems to have a galvanising effect on the group's grassroots supporters in the wider Shia community.

“Anyone who dies in the shrines is preventing sectarian strife,” says one response to Mr Nasrallah’s speech on the Facebook page of a group calling themselves the ‘Fedayeen of Sayida Zeinab’.

“We are behind your sword and we chant: ‘Zeinab Zeinab Zeinab’.”

Some of Hizbollah’s domestic Sunni opponents are themselves either fighting or otherwise supporting the rebellion in Syria. Both sides have mostly sought to avoid confronting each other on Lebanese soil.

As the stakes for both sides in Syria get higher however the public evasions which have helped sustain this surreal arrangement are starting to give way to a more brazen approach. As Mr Nasrallah’s speech suggests, sooner or later, battle lines will be drawn.

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