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Hezbollah sacrifices popularity for survival

In Syria, the Party of God is struggling for an un-divine victory



A dozen Hezbollah fighters were killed and over 20 injured in an ambush Monday in Sayyida Zainab outside Damascus, Al-Arabiya reported Tuesday. The station cited sources as saying that a number of the wounded were transferred to the Rasul al-Azam Hospital in southern Beirut's Dahiyeh suburb. Al-Arabiya's report added that when Hezbollah official Sheikh Mohammad Yazbeck was offering condolences to a family of one of the deceased, the dead fighter's mother asked him, "You told us your battle is with Israel. Why did you send our children to die in Syria?"

That same night, a bomb was discovered in Beirut's Hay al-Sellom, a predominantly Shiite neighborhood, with a message from Jabhat al-Nusra directed at the Shiite group Hezbollah. A Hezbollah explosives expert diffused the bomb and moved it to an unknown destination.

It is hard to believe that Jabhat al-Nusra would sign the bomb if they wanted to hurt Hezbollah, even if it is only a matter of time before the Front starts targeting Shiite areas in Lebanon. But for Hezbollah, the timing couldn't be better. Raising fears of Jabhat al-Nusra within the Shiite community is the only way for the Party of God to quell the increasing fears resulting from military involvement of the Party in Syria. It also helps in lobbying more fighters to join Hezbollah in Syria to defend Shiite interests.

For Hezbollah, it is now a matter of survival. They are aware of their declining popularity. A number of Hezbollah fighters have refused to go to Syria and some have actually defected. More Shiites are converting to Sunni Islam in order to pursue a normal life outside Lebanon. Getting a working visa for Gulf countries is becoming impossible if you're a Lebanese Shiite, so the sectarian identity that Hezbollah highlighted in their rhetoric for the past two decades is now being sacrificed by many young Shiites for the sake of financial security. Life seems to beat all ideologies and identities.

But for Hezbollah, this is not an issue that would change or stop their involvement in Syria. The party is an Iranian creation and will certainly follow Iran's orders everywhere. And if Iran decides that Syria is the battleground now, then Hezbollah will do whatever it takes to win there, even if it costs them their popular Shiite base.

For Iran, this is a matter of survival, not power. The region is changing and the old games are no longer working. The plan of being the main player in the region is today jeopardized by the sudden rise of Islamists and sectarian politics. The nuclear program is not enough and Syria is too significant for Iran to lose. Therefore, Iran had to take charge and is now calling the shots in Syria.

Reports coming from Syria on Iran's involvement indicate that Bashar al-Assad is no longer in charge and that Iran is the real

decision-maker, mainly on strategic and military issues. Iran now seeks to turn the Syrian revolution into a long-lasting sectarian war in order to protect its strategic interests in the region.

Iran has not been sending Lebanese and Iraqi Shiite fighters to Syria in order to protect the regime or the president; they know Assad is gone and all they need now is to make sure they don't lose Syria after losing Assad.

Iran knows very well that the US will not get militarily involved in Syria or in the Middle East in general. They know that the fight is now with extreme Islamists supported by the Gulf countries and that the sectarian fight is now spreading to the whole region, but that's not the problem. On the contrary, Iran's involvement in Syria was a decision that took all these consequences into consideration.

Today, Iran and Hezbollah understand these regional challenges and they are changing their strategies to take advantage of them; that is, to exert more control in the region through sectarian clashes instead of diplomacy.

Therefore, it is not important if Hezbollah is losing popularity at home because of its military involvement in Syria; in fact, Hezbollah has been transformed from a resistance movement and political party to a military Shiite militia fighting Sunnis in Syria. It doesn't matter that all the Shiites in the region will have to pay the price for that. Hezbollah has sacrificed popularity for survival.

Hezbollah is fighting under the **Abu El Fadl Al Abbas brigade** in Damascus, and it has also spread from Qusayr in Lebanon's Bekaa Valley to some areas in Homs, which has become a very significant and strategic area for Iran because it links Lebanon – and Damascus – to the Alawite coast. Homs could seriously alter the balance of power.

However, the Iranian investment in Syria is not about an Alawite state to protect Assad and the Alawites. It is more about an Iranian presence in Syria to protect Iran in the region. Syrian opposition figures who preferred to stay anonymous told NOW that the **operation** that targeted Assad's inner circle, or what was known as the "Crisis Cell" in Damascus on July 18, 2012, killing three high-rank officers, was actually planned and executed by Iran's revolutionary guards, in an attempt to get rid of the Syrian decision makers and gain more control over military and security decision.

The plan is to take over Syria, not protect the regime. However, with the increasing military gains of Islamists groups and the radicalization of the rebels, Iran and Hezbollah's plan hasn't been successful as they envisioned. The city of Homs hasn't fallen into Iran's hands. There is no divine victory here.

The problem is that the longer the fight goes on, the more sectarian it will become. Hezbollah will find itself fighting in a territory that is gradually changing to a Sunni Islamic space. This will not spare Lebanon, as a sectarian war over the *Umma* will only mean that the Shiites in the whole region will become victims of another divine war, this time a Sunni one.

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