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May 23, 2013

Hezbollah slips in Qusayr

The Party of God's elite forces are increasingly struggling against the FSA



It's been five days since Hezbollah and Assad regime forces launched their joint offensive on the town of al-Qusayr in the Homs countryside. Hezbollah and regime media were quick to claim major advances, confidently predicting that the town would fall swiftly. These pronouncements have proven premature.

The attack on al-Qusayr has been long in the making. Assad's forces, limited in manpower, are now acting more in concert with irregular sectarian militias trained by Iran. But the string of tactical gains in the Homs countryside, starting in April and leading to the current battle in al-Qusayr, is tied directly to Hezbollah's lead role in spearheading ground operations.

As it **became clear** that the Syrian opposition was putting up fierce resistance, Hezbollah began adjusting its story about the battle for al-Qusayr. The group was now **making it known** that it was sending in reinforcements from its elite units, and that the fighting **might last** at least another week. More troublesome for Hezbollah, however, was the news about the severe losses its units were sustaining, with casualty numbers ranging from 30 to 40 dead after the first day of fighting alone. By Tuesday, Syrian activists in al-Qusayr were **claiming** another 25 dead Hezbollah fighters. This, of course, is not counting those who had been killed prior to the latest assault, going back to last year. The number and make-up of the casualties raise some interesting questions about Hezbollah's fighting force post-2006.

It is generally estimated that Hezbollah lost 500-600 soldiers during the July 2006 war with Israel. Not only was that a high percentage of its regular fighting force — thought to be anywhere around 2,000 men at the time — but also, it represented a loss of operational memory, as many of those fighters had gained combat experience against Israel and its proxy (the South Lebanon Army) in southern Lebanon. Some observers at the time **maintained** that many of Hezbollah's best fighters "never saw action" in 2006, as local village fighters, and not Hezbollah "regulars," handled much of the defense. But this was mainly party propaganda attempting to put a brave face on what was by any measure a major blow to the resistance.

It's been reported since that, after the war ended, Hezbollah embarked on a major recruitment effort, and sent new recruits to Iran for training in order to rebuild its elite units. These new members, however, have not seen actual combat. Judging from the death notices of Hezbollah fighters in al-Qusayr and Damascus, many of them seem to be in their early to mid-20s. In other words, these are fighters unlikely to have participated in the fighting in 2006, and who are part of the post-2006 recruitment drive.

Accompanying these untested fighters are older experienced fighters and unit commanders, several of whom have been killed as well, as obvious from the various posters of the fallen released by the group. Last year, for example, one such senior military

commander, Ali Nassif (Abu Abbas), was killed near al-Qusayr.

Shimon Shapira, an authority on Hezbollah and a retired Brigadier General now at the Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs, thinks that there are several hundred Hezbollah fighters in Syria, “most of them from the elite units.” This description fits with what some local sources in Dahiyeh have **told** NOW Arabic about the Hezbollah soldiers in Syria. However, these sources applied that description to the young fighters who are trained but not battle tested. Shapira explains that these younger soldiers “are well trained, some of them in Iran, and are considered elite in Hezbollah standards” – the operative words here being “Hezbollah standards.” In other words, as noted earlier in reference to the 2006 war, while there has been a tendency, carefully nurtured by Hezbollah, to mythologize the outfit's elite fighters, their capabilities should be kept in perspective.

What, then, does it mean that Hezbollah is now sending “elite” units to reinforce its fighters in al-Qusayr? Does it mean more of the same younger, untested fighters? Or does it mean sending even more of the experienced, if older, soldiers? Each option exposes a different set of vulnerabilities. A high casualty rate of newly trained “elite” fighters, recruited to replace those killed in 2006, means a waste of precious time and resources. The loss of even more battle-hardened soldiers, on top of the 500-600 from 2006, means further loss of operational memory and combat experience in the party's fighting corps.

If the casualty rate stays this high even for another week, it could prove devastating. For instance, according to a party official who **spoke to** the Kuwaiti *al-Rai*, many of those killed on the first day in al-Qusayr were cut down by landmines and IED's prepared by the Syrian rebels. A Lebanese source who follows the group closely says that a company of 200 Hezbollah fighters attempted the initial assault but ran into the hidden explosive devices, resulting in the high death toll. The source reveals that the Syrians received assistance from certain Palestinian factions in planning the defense of the town.

Already, prior to the latest onslaught on al-Qusayr, Hezbollah's former secretary general, Subhi Tofeyli, stated that the group had lost 138 members in Syria. Shapira believes that “from the hundreds” they have deployed, “they have lost over 200. Some are commanders, over 30-35 years of age.” As many as 65 – ten percent of the total lost in the 2006 war – were killed in just two days of fighting.

There's another key issue to consider: Even if in the end Hezbollah manages to take the town, it remains unclear who would hold it. Indeed, this has been a problem for the Assad regime throughout the two-year conflict: Assad forces can capture ground from the rebels but they don't have enough manpower to hold it. The likelihood, then, of a renewed Hezbollah engagement in al-Qusayr

further down the road is likely – provided the rebels continue to receive steady shipments of ammunition and are able to secure supply lines.

The severity of this overall picture explains why Hezbollah's chief Hassan Nasrallah had to travel to Tehran and meet with Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei and Quds Force commander Qassem Soleimani. There, he was **reportedly** told to go all in, regardless of the cost. It was Iran's call. After all, not only were these fighters trained in Iran, but also they were prepared in order to serve in the next ground war with Israel. In fact, over the last three years, Hezbollah has been putting out leaks in the media about its intention to have its commando infantry units go on the offensive and take the fight to northern Israel in any future conflict.

By publicly taking the lead in the assault operations in Syria, Hezbollah was to show its military capability to decisively and swiftly win battles – first in al-Qusayr, then on other fronts in the country. The problem for Iran, however, is that, regardless what happens next in al-Qusayr, the performance of Hezbollah's elite forces is signaling the opposite of the message Iran sought to communicate.

As more of the group's elite units are called up from Lebanon to reinforce their comrades in Syria, Iran has to be concerned about more than just seeing its strategic weapons caches blown up by Israel. It also has to be worried about how Hezbollah's vulnerabilities are being exposed not by the IDF, but by Syrian rebels that the Party of God was supposed to dispatch easily. If the Iranians have overestimated Hezbollah's capabilities against an adversary like the Free Syrian Army, one wonders what else about their power they've misjudged.