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Hezbollah's Vietnam?



The only thing odd about Hezbollah's intervention in the Syrian conflict is that it took over two years for the party and its backers in

Tehran to make the decision. That's because whatever one thinks of Hezbollah, the triumph of Syria's rebels always posed an existential threat to the party and its agenda.

The victory in Qusayr was undeniably an important one for Hezbollah and the Syrian regime, knocking the rebels out of a swath of strategic territory in the province of Homs, linking Damascus to the coast. It now allows the Assad regime to turn its attentions to other areas from where the regime was forced to withdraw.

Attention is now focused on Aleppo, where Hezbollah combatants have been **amassing** recently. However, we can't forget that the rebels have already been pushed out of neighborhoods around Damascus. And the recent deployment of Patriot missiles and F-16 aircrafts to Jordan suggests there are expectations of a regime offensive in the southern province of Deraa, considered the most likely location from where rebels could mount an attack against the Syrian capital.

Hezbollah's deepening involvement in the Syrian war is a high-risk venture. Many see this as a mistake by the party, and it may well be. Qusayr will be small change compared to Aleppo, where the rebels are well entrenched and benefit from supply lines leading to Turkey. In the larger regional rivalry between Iran and Turkey, the Turkish army and intelligence services have an interest in helping make things very difficult for Hezbollah and the Syrian army in northern Syria, particularly after the car-bomb **attack** in Reyhanli in May.

Many will be watching closely to see how the current **crisis** in Turkey affects Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan's ability to react to the Syrian situation, particularly if the epicenter of the fighting shifts to Aleppo. Erdogan has faced the displeasure among many in Turkey's southern border areas with their government's policy in Syria. At the same time, a defeat of the Syrian rebels in and around Aleppo is not something that Turkey can easily swallow so near to its borders, particularly if Hezbollah is instrumental in the fighting.

Hezbollah is willing to take heavy casualties in Syria, if this allows it to rescue the Assad regime. The real question is what time frame we are talking about, and how this affects the party's vital interests elsewhere. For now, Hezbollah has entered Syria with no exit strategy. The way in which Hassan Nasrallah **framed** the intervention indicates that it is open-ended. This will prompt other parties to take actions and decisions they might otherwise have avoided for as long as the Syrian conflict was primarily one between Syrians.

Hezbollah is already a magnet for individuals and groups in Syria keen to take the air out of the region's leading Shiite political-military organization - or simply to protect their towns and villages. As Qusayr showed, the presence of Hezbollah only induces its enemies to fight twice as hard against the party. As a proxy of Iran, Hezbollah will prompt governments to do the same, and they will see an opportunity to wear down the party and trap it in a grinding, no-win situation.

Playing in the favor of Hezbollah's enemies is that the party has little latitude to alter its strategy in Syria. It must go all the way, predisposing it to sink ever-deeper into the Syrian quagmire, or until the point where the Syrian regime and pro-regime militias can capture and control territory on their own. That is not easy in a guerrilla war in which rebels have often out-matched the army.

Hezbollah, by contrast, benefits from coordination between the Syrian regime and Russia and Iran. Hezbollah's entry into the conflict in Syria was, clearly, one facet of a broad counter-attack agreed by the Russians and Iranians, who have slowly but effectively reinforced and reorganized Syria's army and intelligence services in the past two years. Their behavior has been disgraceful and pitiless, but from the start their objective was clear – to save Assad rule – while the Obama administration offered no strategy at all, and compensated for its incompetence in addressing the Syrian crisis with empty rhetoric.

Many have commented on the fact that Hezbollah's reputation is in tatters. The so-called champion of the deprived is now at the vanguard of Bashar al-Assad's repression of his own people; the embodiment of resistance has shifted forces away from the border with Israel to help in crushing an uprising against a brutal dictator.

That's perhaps true, but Hezbollah is not particularly concerned with its reputation, except when it affects its political power. The party's behavior is shaped by stark power calculations, and it has often read this into political situations with some accuracy. Hezbollah feels that, ultimately, if Assad stays in office and the uprising against him is overwhelmed, this will impose a new reality that will allow the party to resist all counter-reactions. In the end, Hezbollah knows, power tends to define reputation in the Middle East much more than allegiance to what is regarded as the morally acceptable position.

But that interpretation will apply only if Hezbollah avoids being drawn into a long and debilitating campaign in Syria. The party's tolerance threshold is high, as is its ability to maintain Lebanese Shiite loyalty. But in Syria, as in Lebanon previously, the outsider is at a disadvantage. Hezbollah should learn the lessons from its own experience. The party cannot allow Syria to become its Vietnam.