

APRIL 2014

MARISA SULLIVAN

## MIDDLE EAST SECURITY REPORT 19

# HEZBOLLAH IN SYRIA



*Cover: Poster of Lebanon's Hezbollah leader Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah in old Damascus August 21, 2010. REUTERS/Khaled al-Hariri. Reproduced with permission.*

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## HEZBOLLAH IN SYRIA

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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Hezbollah's deepening involvement in Syria is one of the most important factors of the conflict in 2013 and 2014. Since the beginning of 2013, Hezbollah fighters have operated openly and in significant numbers across the border alongside their Syrian and Iraqi counterparts. They have enabled the regime to regain control of rebel-held areas in central Syria and have improved the effectiveness of pro-regime forces. The impact of Hezbollah's involvement in Syria has been felt not just on the battlefield, where the regime now has momentum in many areas, but also in Lebanon where growing sectarian tensions have undermined security and stability.

The war in Syria presents a significant threat to the strategic alliance of Iran, Syria, and Hezbollah. The Syrian government, the vital conduit between Iran and Hezbollah, is in danger of being overthrown. Iran cannot afford to lose its most important foothold in the Levant, and Hezbollah cannot risk losing its access to critical Iranian and Syrian support. Syria's importance to Hezbollah, however, is not limited to its role as a conduit for financial and material support; the Assad regime has provided safe haven for Hezbollah training camps and weapons storage.

It is through this relationship that Hezbollah has therefore entered the conflict as a key player. Since 2006, Hezbollah fighters have trained in Lebanon and Iran in tactics of both offensive and defensive urban warfare. Hezbollah fighters offer capabilities that complement the Assad regime, including light infantry, reconnaissance, and sniper fire. Hezbollah can also provide additional training and combat manpower at a time when pro-regime forces are stretched from years of fighting.

Although Hezbollah has retained a high degree of secrecy about the size, organization, and activities of its fighters in Syria it is still possible to assess the group's involvement in Syria from open-source accounts of Hezbollah's presence. The exact contributions of Hezbollah remains murky, but their impact on the battlefield in 2013 and onward is without question. The role of Hezbollah in Syria shifted dramatically in early 2013 from what was primarily an advisory mission to one in which Hezbollah forces assumed a direct combat role, operating in larger numbers alongside Syrian military and paramilitary forces. They also expanded their efforts to train a reorganized pro-Assad paramilitary force.

The beginning of April 2013 saw Hezbollah's involvement in Syria shift with the decision to lead the ground assault on al-Qusayr, a primarily Sunni town in Homs province not far from the border with Lebanon. The Qusayr offensive was a departure from Hezbollah's previous involvement in Syria. Not only did Hezbollah operate in much larger, more concentrated numbers than ever before, but the group also controlled the planning and conduct of the operation.

The victory at al-Qusayr marked an important inflection point in the Syrian conflict. First, it dealt a major blow to rebel forces militarily and psychologically. Al-Qusayr also began a new phase of overt and substantial Hezbollah involvement in Syria. Hezbollah's involvement was integral to the Syrian regime's success and the organization has openly committed to ensuring Assad's success. The Syrian regime followed up its victory in al-Qusayr with attempts to regain territory in Homs, Aleppo, and Damascus. In each of these places, Hezbollah acted in support of the regime, although this support has sometimes taken on different forms; Hezbollah fighters have augmented Syrian forces on the battlefield.

There are different ways that Hezbollah operates at the tactical level in Syria. First, Hezbollah fighters train NDF paramilitaries at military bases across Syria. This training has proved instrumental in cultivating a light infantry force that can help the regime hold cleared terrain. Another way Hezbollah fighters have augmented Syrian forces is through acting as advisers and trainers for the Syrian military and paramilitary forces, either in an embedded or partnered capacity. Hezbollah fighters have also led units comprised of Iraqi Shi'a militants, especially in Damascus. Often, Hezbollah forces are far better trained, disciplined, and experienced than their Syrian or Iraqi counterparts. Hezbollah fighters improve combat effectiveness when partnered with less-capable Syrian units. One Hezbollah fighter described this effect: "When we first started helping the Syrians, it was true they had big problems with their army...they had no skill, no discipline and no leadership. Now, the men they have left have learned a lot and are very serious fighters. They've become more

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like Hezbollah.” Both Syrian and Iraqi fighters have also benefitted from the much-needed morale boost that Hezbollah fighters provide.

Hezbollah has moved beyond training and defensive missions and now conducts offensive operations on behalf of the Syrian regime. The group brings important capabilities to the fight, and this has widened the geographic scope of their involvement. Hezbollah has played an integral role in the regime’s ability to clear urban terrain in Damascus and Homs. The Assad regime sought to follow up on its successes in these areas by conducting counter-insurgency operations to clear the mountainous Qalamoun area, which lies between these cities along the border with Lebanon. A major highway runs through the area, linking Damascus to Homs and making it important terrain for securing the regime’s freedom of movement north of the capital to its coastal strongholds. Qalamoun has also functioned as a rebel support zone from which to launch attacks on regime positions along Damascus’s northern flank and to provide logistical support to opposition fighters in Eastern Ghouta. Rebels have controlled several towns throughout Qalamoun since mid-2012, including Yabrud, Nabk, and Rankous. Hezbollah has therefore sought to secure this crucial territory both to secure their interests in Lebanon and to support the Assad regime.

Hezbollah’s acknowledgement of and justification for its involvement in Syria has had important consequences on Hezbollah’s standing within Lebanon as well as on security and stability within the country. Growing sectarian tensions have directly impacted security and stability in Lebanon. There have been a series of attacks against Hezbollah strongholds since the group expanded its involvement in Syria in May. Nasrallah continues to portray Hezbollah’s involvement in Syria as a confrontation with Israel, the West, and Sunni extremists.

Overall, Hezbollah’s support for Assad seeks to achieve three broad objectives. First, Hezbollah seeks to preserve the Axis of Resistance by shoring up the military capabilities of the Assad regime. Second, Hezbollah also seeks to retain access to Iranian and Syrian material support by securing the lines of communication that run from Damascus to Lebanon from any rebel interference. Without the ability to operate within Syria, Iranian support to Hezbollah becomes much more difficult and risks interdiction; Hezbollah’s own military capabilities and readiness would suffer without access to this military and financial assistance. Third, the group also seeks to prevent the emergence of a Sunni-dominated regime in Syria should Assad fall.

The conflict has caused Hezbollah to suffer large numbers of casualties, including veteran commanders. Yet Hezbollah’s continued commitment to Syria suggests that the group believes the benefits of its involvement outweigh the costs. The gains the Assad regime has made in the early parts of 2014 reflect the significant advantage provided by Hezbollah’s involvement. The fighting in Syria has accelerated the creation of a sizeable and trained force of Hezbollah, Iranian, Syrian, and Iraqi fighters which is interoperable in ways not previously seen. Each is training and learning to incorporate the others in their operations. The conflict in Syria, which began as a major test of the Axis of Resistance, has, in fact, made it a more integrated and capable fighting force. The ability for Iranian, Hezbollah, and Iraqi fighters to deploy across borders to conduct sustained operations in varied terrain has given the Iran and its allies an important tool by which to advance its interests. It is for this reason that Hezbollah’s role in Syria is such an important development and one that is no doubt alarming for Hezbollah and Iran’s regional rivals.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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By Marisa Sullivan

Hezbollah's deepening involvement in Syria is one of the most important factors of the conflict in 2013 and 2014. Since the beginning of 2013, Hezbollah fighters have operated openly and in significant numbers across the border alongside their Syrian and Iraqi counterparts. They have enabled the regime to regain control of rebel-held areas in central Syria and have improved the effectiveness of pro-regime forces. The impact of Hezbollah's involvement in Syria has been felt not just on the battlefield, where the regime now has momentum in many areas, but also in Lebanon where growing sectarian tensions have undermined security and stability.

This paper details Hezbollah's involvement in Syria from the beginning of the conflict to the present. Much of the focus is on 2013, when Hezbollah publicly acknowledged its presence in Syria and deepened its commitment on the ground. The first part of the paper explores the relationship between Hezbollah, Iran, and Syria and Hezbollah's rationale for its involvement in Syria. The second part looks at Hezbollah's activities in Syria from 2011 to 2012, when it operated on a limited and clandestine basis. The third section of the paper details Hezbollah's escalation of its presence in 2013 and examines the group's role in operations across Syria since the beginning of 2013. The fourth part analyzes the size, scope, and structure of Hezbollah's operations in Syria. Finally, the paper concludes with a discussion of the implications of Hezbollah's growing presence in Syria within Lebanon, Syria, and more broadly.

### BACKGROUND: THE AXIS OF RESISTANCE

The Axis of Resistance is an Iran-led alliance of state and non-state actors in the Middle East that seeks to confront Western interests in the region, namely those of the United States and Israel. Historically, this alliance has included the Assad regime in Syria and Lebanese Hezbollah. In recent years, Iran has also cultivated Iraqi Shi'a militants as the newest members of this alliance. Aside from shared regional objectives, another pillar of the axis is shared support. Iran provides extensive material, financial, training, and logistical assistance to its regional partners. For example, Iran has supplied Hezbollah with as much as \$200 million each year.<sup>1</sup> After Hezbollah's 2006 war with Israel, Iran and Syria rearmed Hezbollah with vastly expanded and more sophisticated weaponry.<sup>2</sup> Much of this support has flowed through Syria, making it the primary hub in Iran's power projection in the Levant.

The war in Syria presents a significant, even existential, threat to this strategic alliance by endangering one of its

primary members and the chief conduit for Iranian support to Hezbollah. At the same time, Iran cannot afford to lose its most important foothold in the Levant, and Hezbollah cannot risk losing its access to critical Iranian and Syrian support. Maintaining the Axis of Resistance is also a matter of great ideological importance for Iran and its commitment to exporting its Islamic revolutionary principles. For all of these reasons, Iran will go to great lengths to preserve its foothold in Syria.

### *Hezbollah's Importance to Syria*

As the war in Syria has protracted, the Assad regime has relied heavily on its allies, Iran and Hezbollah, for support. Hezbollah has augmented Iran's considerable investment in Syria by providing capabilities that its partners lack. Hezbollah trainers and advisers are well suited to assist pro-regime forces because they speak Arabic (unlike their Iranian counterparts) and have combat experience fighting Israel in southern Lebanon. The Syrian Army consists mainly of heavy, mechanized units, which have had difficulty operating in urban environments against lightly armed guerilla forces.<sup>3</sup> Hezbollah fighters, therefore, offer capabilities that complement the Assad regime, including light infantry, reconnaissance, and sniper fire. Since 2006, Hezbollah fighters have trained in Lebanon and Iran in tactics of both offensive and defensive urban warfare.<sup>4</sup> Hezbollah can also provide additional training and combat manpower at a time when pro-regime forces are stretched from years of fighting.

### *Syria's Importance to Hezbollah*

Syria's importance to Hezbollah cannot be understated. Hezbollah views its organization as the front line in the confrontation with Israel, and sees Syria as its rearguard. Hezbollah chief Hassan Nasrallah called Syria the "backbone" of the resistance in his May 2013 speech, in which he openly acknowledged Hezbollah's involvement in Syria on behalf of the Assad regime.<sup>5</sup> Without the ability to operate within

Syria, Iranian support to Hezbollah becomes much more difficult and risks interdiction. And Hezbollah's own military capabilities and readiness would suffer without access to this military and financial assistance.

The Assad regime has played a vital role in the transfer of weapons, equipment, and money from Iran to Hezbollah in Lebanon. The Iranian regime has flown large numbers of weapons to Damascus, including thousands of rockets as well as accurate and long-range surface-to-surface missiles. Iran has used civilian aircraft and Turkish airspace for these flights, although the air routes have shifted to Iraq on account of more stringent Turkish controls and Iraq's own challenges in policing its airspace.<sup>6</sup> Some of these supplies remain in Syria, while those destined for Hezbollah are transported along ground lines of communication into Lebanon. As the May 2013 Israeli airstrikes against suspected weapons transfers have demonstrated, Syria remains a vital conduit for Iranian support to Hezbollah even as the Assad regime fights for its own survival.<sup>7</sup>

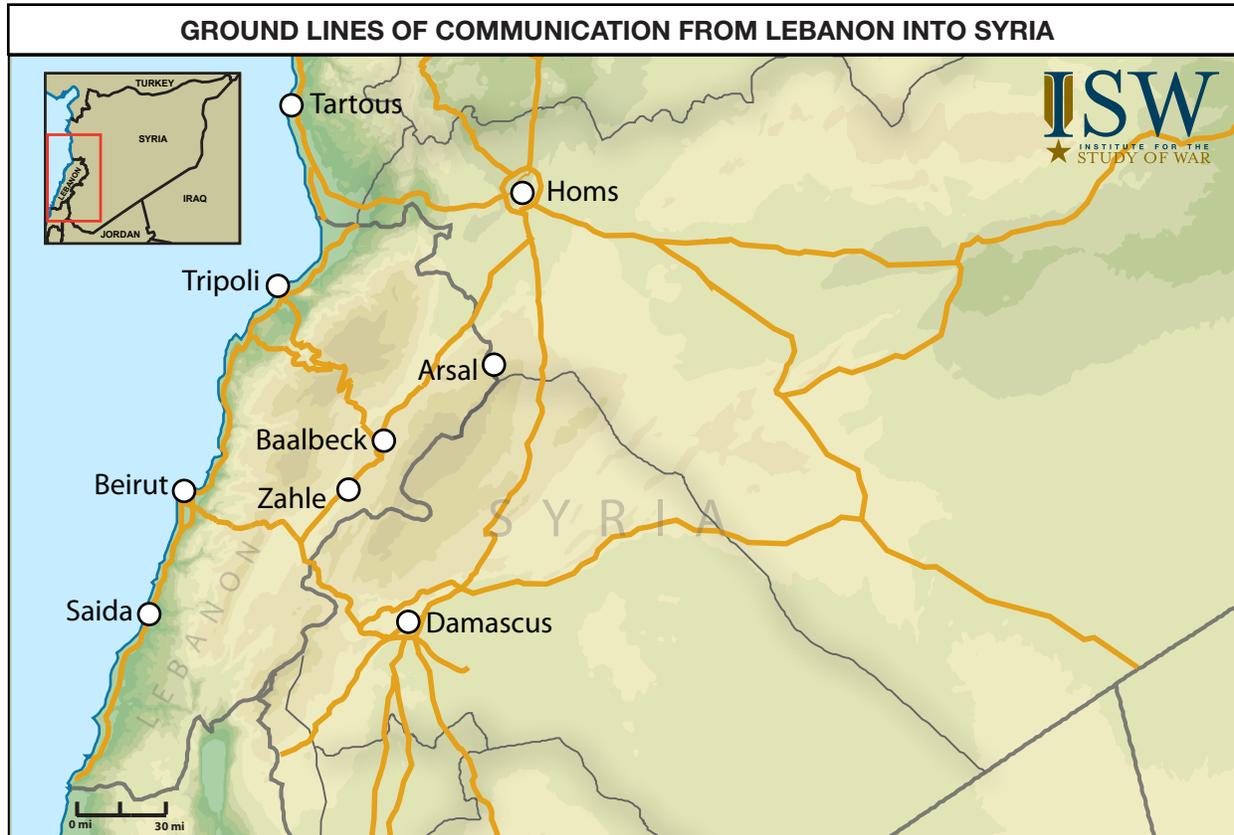
Syria's importance to Hezbollah is not limited to its role as a conduit for financial and material support. The Assad regime has provided safe haven for Hezbollah training camps and weapons storage.<sup>8</sup> Some of these training camps in Syria are located near suspected chemical weapons depots, a development that has worried U.S. officials.<sup>9</sup>

### *Hezbollah's Strategy in Syria*

Hezbollah has become more deeply involved in Syria as the conflict has protracted, given these mutual interests. Hezbollah's support for Assad seeks to achieve three broad objectives. First, Hezbollah seeks to preserve the Axis of Resistance by shoring up the military capabilities of the Assad regime. It is doing this through the provision of training and assistance, and more recently through direct combat involvement.

Second, Hezbollah also seeks to retain access to Iranian and Syrian material support by securing the lines of communication that run from Damascus to Lebanon from any rebel interference. This has brought it in conflict with rebel groups. For example, the major campaign in al-Qusayr, which will be detailed later in this paper, was an effort to cut off rebel supply lines that both threatened Lebanese Shi'a communities in Syria and endangered to Hezbollah's own lines of communication in the Bekaa Valley of Lebanon.

Third, the group also seeks to prevent the emergence of a Sunni-dominated regime in Syria should Assad fall. Many Shi'a Lebanese are concerned about the rise of "takfiri" groups (a term indicating extreme Sunni organizations) within Syria and the potential for spillover into Lebanon.



**TIMELINE OF HEZBOLLAH STATEMENTS AND ENGAGEMENTS**

STATEMENTS											
JAN 2013	FEB 2013	MAR 2013	APR 2013	MAY 2013	JUN 2013	JUL 2013	AUG 2013	SEPT 2013	OCT 2013	NOV 2013	DEC 2013
			April 30: Nasrallah acknowledges HB involvement in Syria for the first time.	May 9: Nasrallah reiterates support for Assad. May 25: Nasrallah: "Syria is the backbone of Hezbollah." May 28: Nasrallah acknowledges HB involvement in Syria.	June 17: LH Commander describes Hezbollah role in Aleppo.		August 2: Nasrallah: Shore up Hezbollah support.	September 23: Nasrallah denies shipment of CW to Lebanon.		November 25: LH Commander makes statement about casualties in Damascus.	
	February 13: Hassan Shateri, IRGCQF, killed in Syria.			May 19: Hezbollah launches clearing operations in Qusayr.	June 5: Hezbollah launches final assault on Qusayr, the same day Qusayr falls to the regime. June 10: Operation Northern Storm June 11: Hermel residents retaliate in Arsal June 29: Regime launches offensive to regain last parts of Homs	July 9: VBIED in Dahiyeh July 21: Ayman Said Tahini, LH Commander (led AFAB Battalion) buried.	August 15: VBIED in Beirut August 19: Hossam Ali al-Nasr, rumored Senior Commander, killed. August 21: CW attack		August 15: LH gains control of neighborhoods in Damascus	November 17: Offensive in Qalamoun November 19: Iranian embassy double suicide bombing claimed by Abdullah Azzam brigades November 29: Wifaq Sharafeddine, LH Commander, buried.	December 8: Ali Hussein Bazzi, LH Commander, killed.
ENGAGEMENTS											

This has incentivized Hezbollah to fight these groups in Syria to prevent them from strengthening and expanding into Lebanon. As the conflict has taken a more sectarian turn, Hezbollah has also portrayed itself as the defender of the Shi'a in Syria. It has positioned its forces in defense of important Shi'a religious sites, most notably the Sayyida Zeinab shrine in Damascus. Hezbollah has also sought to protect Lebanese Shi'a living in Syria, particularly those along the border with Lebanon.

**HEZBOLLAH'S EARLY INVOLVEMENT: 2011-2012**

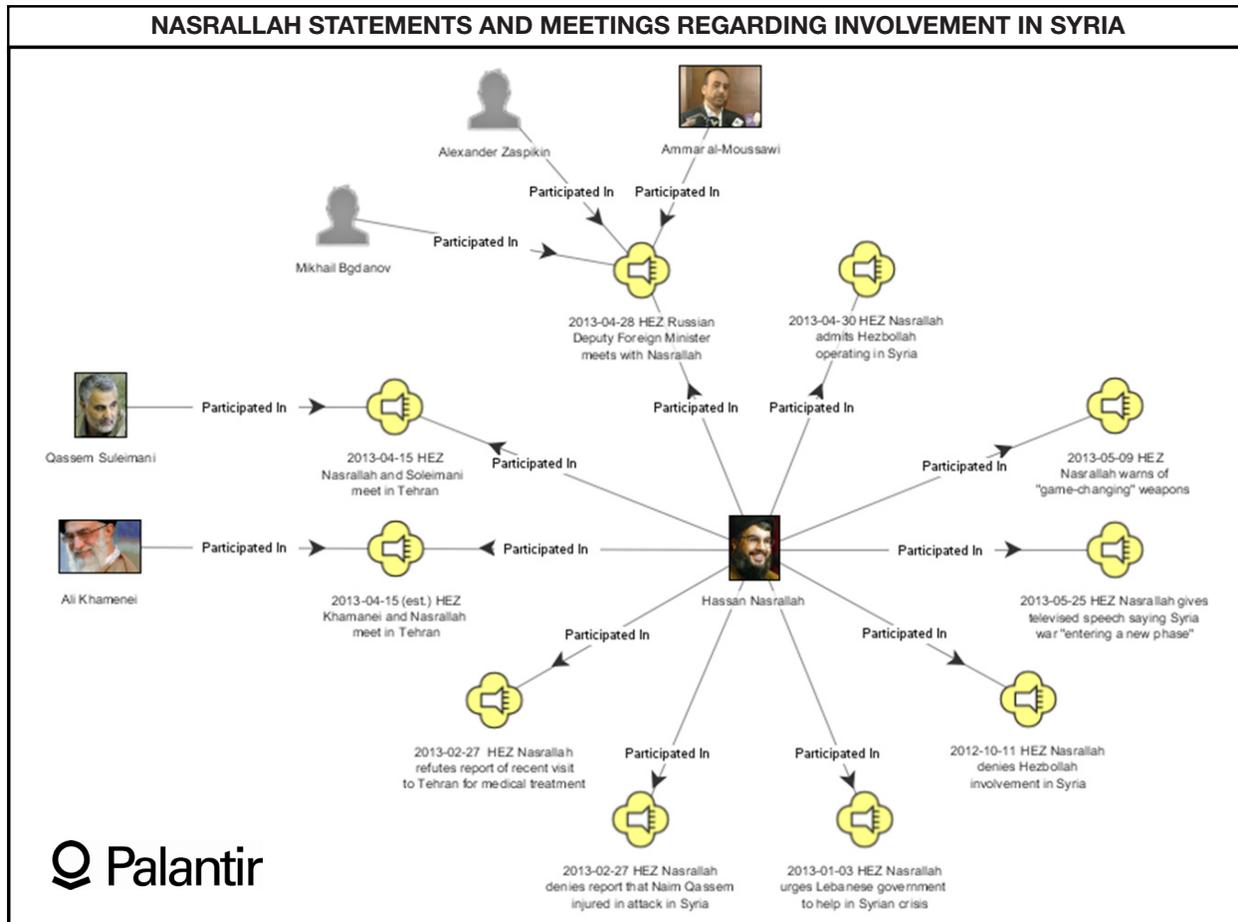
Hezbollah sided with the Assad regime within weeks of the first protests in Syria, Hassan Nasrallah publicly declared his organization's backing of Assad in May 2011, even before the uprising turned violent.<sup>10</sup> Hezbollah rhetorical support for Syrian regime has remained constant throughout the conflict; however, the group's involvement on the ground has evolved as the fighting has protracted.

Hezbollah's activities in Syria in the early years of the conflict were limited in size and scope primarily to advisory and support roles. This was likely a result of the organization's reluctance to get drawn into the fighting in Syria for fear of its consequences for detrimental effects that such involvement might have for Lebanon's stability and for Hezbollah's standing. Moreover, the uprising had not yet metastasized to the scale and scope it has now reached at the beginning

of 2014, and regime forces were not as weakened by years of heavy fighting and an intense pace of operations. Thus, the threat to Assad's regime, and therefore the need for direct involvement by outside forces, was not as great as it would become during 2013 and early 2014.

The nature of Hezbollah's activities has obscured information on the group's early involvement in Syria. Accusations of Hezbollah's activities in Syria on behalf of the regime surfaced in the fall of 2011. For example, in September 2011, Lebanese media reported that several Hezbollah fighters were killed in Syria, where they were assisting the Assad regime's crackdown on protesters.<sup>11</sup> One Syrian government defector accused the regime of using Hezbollah snipers against demonstrators, and claimed that fighters from the Lebanese militant group were fighting alongside Assad's forces in Zabadani.<sup>12</sup> Other reports claimed that scores of Hezbollah fighters were killed in clashes with Free Syrian Army fighters in Homs and Damascus in late 2011.<sup>13</sup> It is difficult to verify the validity of these claims. Many of these stories appear in anti-regime media outlets or are based on single-source reporting from opposition sources. Still, rumors of Hezbollah's involvement did elicit a response from Hassan Nasrallah, who called it "absolutely untrue" that Hezbollah had sent fighters to Syria.<sup>14</sup>

More credible evidence of Hezbollah's role in Syria came to light in the second half of 2012. U.S. officials publicly acknowledged Hezbollah's involvement in the Syrian conflict in August 2012. According to a U.S. Treasury designation, Hezbollah has since early 2011 "directly trained Syrian



government personnel inside Syria and has facilitated the training of Syrian forces by Iran's terrorist arm, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps - Qods Force (IRGC-QF). Hezbollah also has played a substantial role in efforts to expel Syrian opposition forces from areas within Syria.<sup>15</sup> This official designation lent credence to other reports that members of Hezbollah's Unit 910, an elite commando force that conducts clandestine activities outside of Lebanon, had assisted the Syrian military in and around Homs during the summer of 2012.<sup>16</sup>

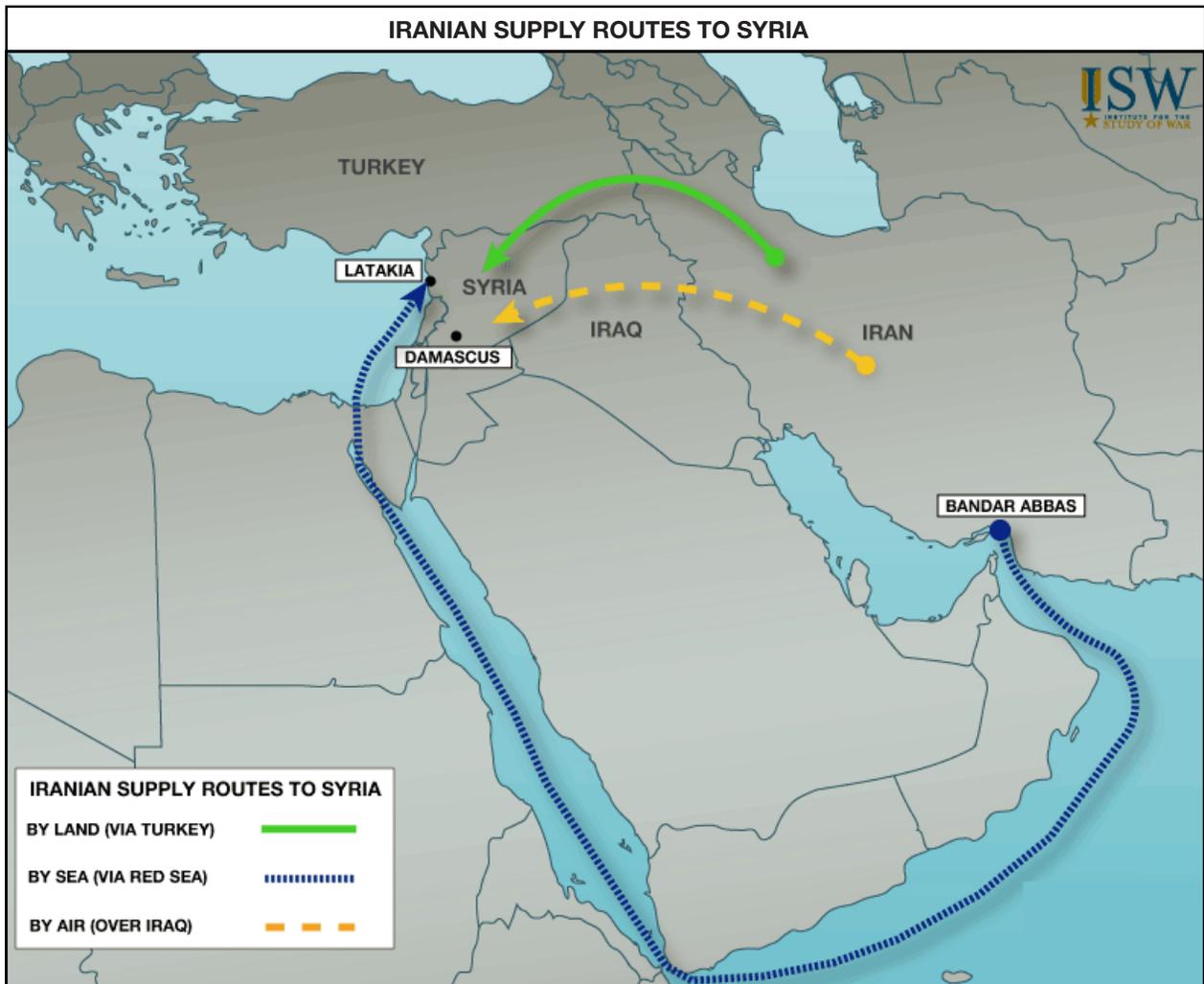
Burials of Hezbollah fighters killed in Syria also bolstered U.S. and opposition claims of the Lebanese militant group's growing role in the uprising. In the summer of 2012, Hezbollah's fighters killed in Syria were quietly buried in Lebanon. These burials occurred often with few formalities, as Hezbollah officials remained unwilling to publicly acknowledge their involvement in Syria.<sup>17</sup> The public funeral of a senior Hezbollah commander, Ali Hussein Nassif, in the Bekaa Valley in early October was a departure from previous burials because it drew large crowds, including high-ranking Hezbollah officials. Hezbollah claimed that Nassif was killed doing his "jihadist duties," a phrase used to obscure the location and activities of Hezbollah martyrs.<sup>18</sup> Lebanese officials, however, acknowledged that Nassif's body had been transferred from Syria, where he was killed in late September.<sup>19</sup>

According to reports by Free Syrian Army fighters and anti-regime activists, Nassif was killed south of al-Qusayr when an improvised explosive device (IED) targeted his convoy.<sup>20</sup> It is unclear what Nassif was doing in Syria, but the reported location of his death was an area where opposition members accused Hezbollah of operating alongside Syrian forces in an effort to clear rebel pockets.<sup>21</sup>

The public funerals of Hezbollah members put the organization in a difficult position. Facing growing scrutiny over the group's role in Syria, Nasrallah denied that his organization was fighting alongside the Assad regime in a speech in mid-October 2012.<sup>22</sup> Yet, he did acknowledge indirectly that Hezbollah members were fighting in Syria, but that they were there of their own accord to defend Lebanese Shi'a living in villages near the border.<sup>23</sup>

## ESCALATING ROLE IN 2013

Hezbollah's role in Syria shifted dramatically in early 2013 from what was primarily an advisory mission to one in which Hezbollah forces assumed a direct combat role, operating in larger numbers alongside Syrian military and paramilitary forces. They also expanded their efforts to train a reorganized



pro-Assad paramilitary force. The extent of Hezbollah's contributions remains murky, but their impact on the battlefield in 2013 is without question.

Late 2012 and early 2013 was low point for the Assad Regime and its Iranian backers.<sup>24</sup> The pace of fighting had strained the Assad regime's military capabilities and there was increasing pessimism about the survivability of the Assad regime. Rebel forces were gaining ground in Aleppo and the north.<sup>25</sup> The conflict was becoming increasingly sectarian, and al-Qaeda aligned groups like Jabhat al-Nusra were assuming a more prominent role in Syria. Iran had also suffered important losses in Syria. In August 2012, Syrian rebels captured forty-eight members of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps-Qods Force (IRGC-QF), who were released a month later in exchange for two thousand prisoners held by the Assad regime.<sup>26</sup> The February 2013 assassination of senior Qods Force General Hassan Shateri in Syria was another critical blow.<sup>27</sup>

Iran increased its commitment to the Assad regime during this time, stepping up its efforts to reverse the situation in Syria.

IRGC-QF commander Qassem Soleimani made regular visits to Damascus to personally oversee the operations.<sup>28</sup> Also present at Soleimani's headquarters in Damascus were the top commanders of Syria's military, a Hezbollah commander, and a coordinator for Iraq's Shi'a militants.<sup>29</sup> Iran also increased the pace of its supply flights and ramped up its presence of IRGC-QF advisers across the country.<sup>30</sup>

The Assad Regime, at the urging of Iran, adjusted its strategy for the coming year and sought to focus on several key areas rather than trying to fight conduct operations against multiple fronts simultaneously.<sup>31</sup> The regime intended to concentrate first on Damascus and the areas that link the capital to Homs and the coast in order to consolidate control over these areas before pushing further north and east.<sup>32</sup> The regime's focus also included securing the areas along the Lebanon-Syria border. Hezbollah also shared this goal, as rebel gains threatened its own strongholds in the Bekaa Valley.

The Syrian regime also embarked on a reorganization of its paramilitary forces in late 2012. A number of pro-Assad militias operated in Syria, namely the Jaysh al-Shaabi (Popular



Army) and the shabiha. These groups were primarily Alawite, drawn from local communities as a neighborhood-watch force. Many of these groups were folded into a newly created National Defense Force (NDF), a national paramilitary force intended to resemble Iran's Basij force. Indeed, Brigadier General Hossein Hamedani, the former Basij deputy commander, was involved in the efforts to stand up the paramilitary force.<sup>33</sup> Other sources say Hamedani also directs operations in Syria and oversees Iranian arms shipments to Hezbollah.<sup>34</sup>

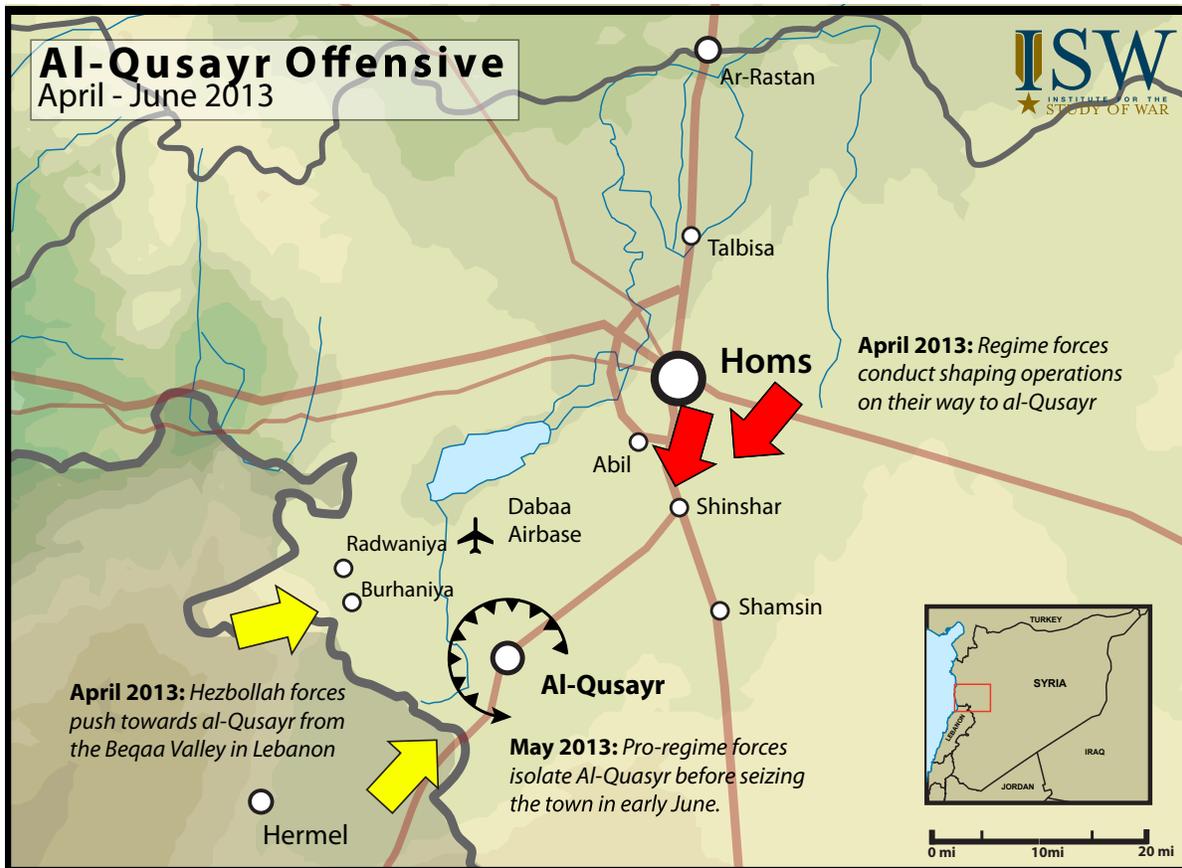
The NDF is comprised mostly of Alawites and regime loyalists, like the Jaysh al-Shaabi or shabiha. Yet, the NDF has a more formalized and functional structure and its members are licensed, trained, equipped, and paid by the regime.<sup>35</sup> They also report directly to senior officers within the Syrian military and intelligence services.<sup>36</sup> The organization provides the Assad regime with an alternative to the Syrian Arab Army, which has been weakened by years of fighting, defections, and rebel infiltration.<sup>37</sup> The NDF numbered around 50,000-60,000 by mid-2013, and was set to grow to 100,000.<sup>38</sup>

As Iran's increased commitment to Assad's survival, Hezbollah also stepped up its activities in Syria on behalf of the Assad regime. This was likely the result of Iranian encouragement as well as mutual interests. One avenue for Hezbollah's deepened involvement was its role in the creation and expansion of the NDF. Hezbollah operatives have trained NDF members throughout Syria, including in Latakia, Homs, Damascus, and Aleppo.<sup>39</sup> As previously mentioned, Hezbollah's combat experience in unconventional and urban warfare, light infantry capability, and common language make it an ideal training force for Syrian paramilitaries. Hezbollah has instructed NDF recruits in basic combat skills, urban warfare and guerilla tactics, while others are taught specialized tactics such as infiltration, surveillance, and intelligence collection. Others have even been flown from Latakia to Tehran to receive additional training at Iranian camps where Hezbollah trainers also operated.<sup>40</sup> Hezbollah has also partnered with the NDF on the battlefield, a development that will be discussed in greater detail below.

A more dramatic shift in Hezbollah's role in Syria came in late spring 2013. Nasrallah made two trips to Tehran in April, where he met with Soleimani, Khamanei, and other senior Iranian officials to discuss the situation in Syria.<sup>41</sup> Unconfirmed reports on the meetings allege that Khamanei pressed Nasrallah for a greater Hezbollah commitment to Syria.<sup>42</sup> While the exact nature of the talks is now known, within days of Nasrallah's return to Beirut, the Hezbollah leader gave a speech on April 30, 2013 in which he acknowledged Hezbollah's efforts in Syria on behalf of the Assad regime for the first time. "Hezbollah is giving a hand in Syria," Nasrallah stated in his televised speech.<sup>43</sup> He went on to warn that Syria's regional allies "will not let Syria fall into the hands of America, Israel or *takfiri* groups."<sup>44</sup> Nasrallah gave another speech on May 9, 2013, in which he reiterated his support for the Syrian regime and warned that Syria would supply Hezbollah with "game-changing" weapons.<sup>45</sup> The speech came days after Israel launched airstrikes near Damascus targeting weapons meant for Hezbollah.<sup>46</sup> The Israeli strikes and Nasrallah's response was further evidence of the importance of the relationship for both Syria and Hezbollah. In the weeks that followed, Hezbollah dramatically escalated in the scale of its involvement in Syria, which culminated in the launch of a major Hezbollah-led clearing operation in al-Qusayr.

## HEZBOLLAH RETAKES AL-QUSAYR

Hezbollah's involvement in Syria greatly expanded in April 2013 with the decision to lead the ground assault on al-Qusayr, a primarily Sunni town in Homs province not far from the border with Lebanon. The town is located near strategic routes that connect Damascus to Syria's coastal provinces as well as those that run into Lebanon's Bekaa Valley. Rebels had



controlled the area since mid-2012 and this threatened the Assad regime's main lines of communication.<sup>47</sup> Moreover, anti-regime groups were also using the area to smuggle arms, supplies, and fighters from Lebanon into embattled rebel enclaves in Homs City and elsewhere. Ousting rebels from al-Qusayr was not only a military priority for the Assad regime, but also for Hezbollah, because a rebel presence was also a threat to Lebanese Shi'a villages on both sides of the border and near al-Qusayr.

The overall strategy for retaining al-Qusayr was to isolate the city in order to prevent rebel reinforcement, resupply, and withdrawal. Once Hezbollah and regime forces had cordoned off al-Qusayr, Syrian airstrikes and artillery were to bombard the town to weaken the rebels ahead of a Hezbollah-led ground advance to clear the town. Preparations for the assault on al-Qusayr began in mid-April 2013, Hezbollah fighters attacked smaller villages to southwest of the town, while regime forces seized areas to the north.<sup>48</sup> Hezbollah and Syrian forces gained control of most of the surrounding areas by mid-May, although rebels still controlled an area just north of al-Qusayr near Dabaa.<sup>49</sup>

The Qusayr offensive was a departure from Hezbollah's previous involvement in Syria. Not only did Hezbollah operate in much larger, more concentrated numbers than

ever before, but the group also controlled the planning and conduct of the operation. Roughly 1,200 to 1,700 fighters participated in the battle, and most of them were seasoned veterans drawn from Hezbollah's special forces units.<sup>50</sup> The Hezbollah force operated in 17 units of 100 fighters, and these units were divided further into smaller squads of three to five men.<sup>51</sup> Hezbollah fighters initially served weeklong rotations on the frontlines, but these later were extended to 20-day tours as the battle protracted.<sup>52</sup>

Prior to the offensive, Hezbollah reconnoitered the area and divided the town into 16 military zones and assigned code names to specific objectives and locations.<sup>53</sup> This enabled Hezbollah fighters to communicate over unencrypted radios without compromising their operational security.<sup>54</sup> Hezbollah's control over the operation was so complete that it issued commands to Syrian officers, but its fighters also reportedly operated some of the regime's weapons systems.<sup>55</sup> According to a unnamed regional security official quoted by Reuters, "It is our understanding the Hezbollah crews were even operating Syrian T-55 and T-54 tanks there, as well as all significant artillery systems, anti-tank missiles and so on."<sup>56</sup>

The fighting in al-Qusayr differed from Hezbollah's previous combat experiences, which took place primarily in the rural

and mountainous areas of southern Lebanon. Yet, Hezbollah's training since 2006 focused on developing urban warfare skills. Some of these training courses were held in Iran, where they were conducted in mock cities.<sup>57</sup> Shortly after the battle, Hezbollah fighters told journalists that they were able to implement these new practices in al-Qusayr.<sup>58</sup>

Hezbollah launched its major clearing operations on May 19, 2013. Hezbollah fighters, who were backed by Syrian Arab Army troops, entered the town from the south, east, and west, and advanced northwards. Despite some early gains, Hezbollah fighters encountered heavy resistance from rebel forces, who had entrenched the town prior to the assault. Hezbollah engineers were used to overcome rebel defenses, including improvised explosive devices (IEDs), tunnels, barricades, and booby-traps. Some of these defenses resembled those that Hezbollah had taught Hamas, leading the Shi'a fighters to conclude that the Palestinian group had passed along its expertise to the rebels.<sup>59</sup> Rebel mortar fire also proved problematic, though it was not enough to stop the Hezbollah advance.

For more than two weeks, Hezbollah fighters moved north through the city, clearing areas block by block. In addition to receiving support from SAA air and artillery, Hezbollah used snipers, RPG-7s, and improvised rocket-assisted munitions (IRAMs) made from 107mm Katyusha rockets and other explosives. IRAMS, which are essentially rocket-propelled IEDs, were first used by Iranian-backed Shi'a militants against U.S. forces in Iraq.<sup>60</sup> Hezbollah's urban warfare tactics proved effective. Rebel forces were confined to a small area in the north of the town by early June, and their supplies were dwindling. Rebel leaders decided to withdraw from al-Qusayr on June 3<sup>rd</sup> via a hole in the cordon to the north. Two days later, Hezbollah and SAA troops launched a final assault to clear the town following an intense bombardment of the rebel enclave. That same day, Syrian media outlets broadcast that al-Qusayr had fallen to the regime.<sup>61</sup>

Hezbollah casualties spiked during the Qusayr assault, on account of intensity of the fighting, the increased number of fighters, and the group's leading role in the offensive. More than 200 Hezbollah fighters were buried in late May and early June 2013, and many of these "martyrs" were honored with public funerals attended by senior Hezbollah officials.<sup>62</sup> The group also marked the end of the operation with a celebration in its southern Beirut stronghold of Dahiyeh.<sup>63</sup>

The victory at al-Qusayr marked an important inflection point in the Syrian conflict. First, it dealt a major blow to rebel forces militarily and psychologically.<sup>64</sup> Al-Qusayr also began a new phase of overt and substantial Hezbollah involvement in Syria. Hezbollah's involvement was integral to the Syrian regime's success and has openly committed to ensuring Assad's success. The organization continued to take part in

subsequent operations against rebels, albeit not with the same scale or scope for reasons that will be discussed below.

Hezbollah's offensive in al-Qusayr also marked an important rhetorical shift. Hezbollah no longer defended its activities as those solely in defense of Lebanese Shi'a communities, but openly committed to ensuring Assad remained in power. One week into the offensive, Nasrallah offered a new justification for Hezbollah's involvement in Syria in a speech on May 25, 2013. "Syria is the rear guard of the resistance, its backbone, and the resistance cannot stay with its arms folded when its rear guard is exposed," Nasrallah argued, adding that Hezbollah had "entered a new phase a few weeks ago: the phase of fortifying the resistance and protecting its backbone."<sup>65</sup> Nasrallah portrayed the struggle in Syria not only as an extension of the resistance against Israel and the West, but he also cast the conflict in an increasingly sectarian light, as a fight against the *takfiri* (or Sunni extremist) threat. This portrayal was an effort to garner support from Hezbollah's Shi'a followers in Lebanon, many of whom were skeptical of involvement in Syria for fear it would destabilize Lebanon and be a departure from the group's mission of Islamic resistance against Israel.

## HEZBOLLAH AFTER AL-QUSAYR: SUMMER AND FALL 2013

The Syrian regime followed up its victory in al-Qusayr with attempts to regain territory in Homs, Aleppo, and Damascus.<sup>66</sup>



In each of these places, Hezbollah acted in support of the regime, though not in the same way as in Qusayr, as some had predicted. The specific nature of Hezbollah's involvement in combat operations in Syria is more opaque during this period. Both Hezbollah and the Assad regime sought to trumpet the victory in Qusayr, so there was more information about the nature of the fight. In places like Homs or Aleppo where Hezbollah was operating far from its base of support, there was greater secrecy about the group's activities. Moreover, there were fewer Hezbollah fighters to speak with reporters or media outlets in Lebanon.

Information about Hezbollah's activities in Syria in the summer and fall of 2013 comes from more fragmented sources. First, residents in embattled areas or pro-opposition monitoring groups often report on areas where regime forces are operating with backing from Hezbollah. These accounts often lack detail and have inherent problems on account of their sourcing, but can be useful when paired with other sources. Information about the locations of Hezbollah activity also comes from the announcements of and funerals for Hezbollah fighters killed in Syria. These announcements are often publicized in the local Lebanese press and on social media, and they sometimes indicate the location of the fighter's death or level of seniority within the Lebanese militant wing. Finally, some Hezbollah fighters have spoken to journalists anonymously about their activities in Syria. These accounts, while rare, are often most illuminating the organization's role in Syria.

### *Hezbollah in Aleppo and Homs*

In the immediate aftermath of the al-Qusayr offensive, the regime turned its sights to Aleppo for an assault it dubbed Operation Northern Storm. Syrian military and paramilitary forces deployed to Aleppo, where the regime was struggling to roll back large areas of rebel control.<sup>67</sup> These troops sought to clear areas surrounding the Shi'a villages of Zahra and Nebul north of Aleppo, and consolidate regime control of a line running from Aleppo to Menagh airbase further north.<sup>68</sup>

Media reports speculated that Hezbollah might play a similar role in the fight for Syria's second most-populous city as it did in al-Qusayr. In early June 2013, rebel fighters claimed that in preparation for the assault Hezbollah had massed as many as four thousand fighters around the city, namely in Shi'a enclaves of the northern countryside and in the Military Engineering Academy in the Hamdanieh neighborhood of western Aleppo.<sup>69</sup> Hezbollah militants confirmed their participation in Aleppo, but not in the same way that the group had fought in al-Qusayr.<sup>70</sup> Instead, Hezbollah sought to aid the Syrian regime "indirectly," according to a Lebanese politician close to Hezbollah.<sup>71</sup>

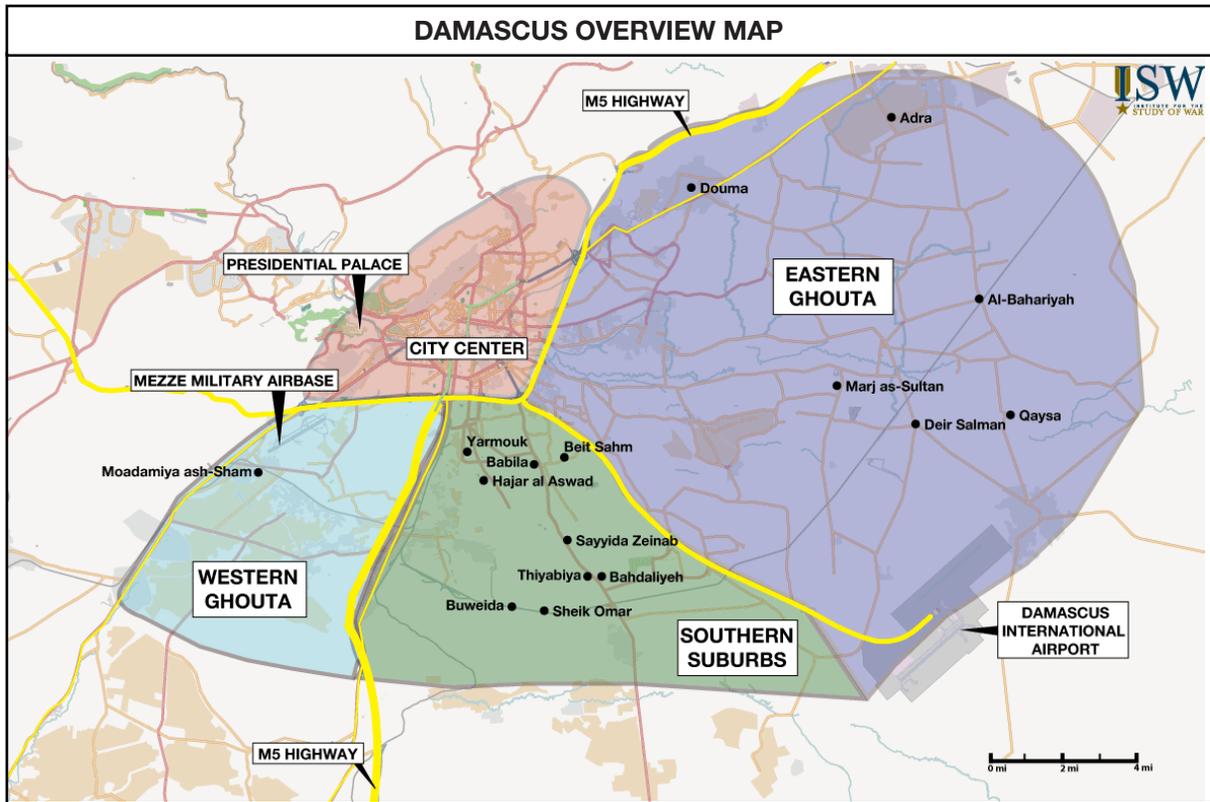
A Hezbollah commander described Hezbollah's role in Aleppo in mid-June 2013. He told a journalist that, "The battle for

Aleppo will be fought by the NDF and the Syria army [sic], with Hezbollah supervising and providing military tactical advice on how to co-ordinate and conduct the offensive.<sup>72</sup> He added that the Hezbollah force presence would "consist mainly of commanders and experts advising and planning together with the Syrian army's commanders in charge of Aleppo on how best to utilize the men on the ground, how to advance and where to fight."<sup>73</sup> Even though the Hezbollah commander describes an advisory role for the Lebanese fighters, rebels fighting in Aleppo claimed they were also encountering Hezbollah fighters during operations.<sup>74</sup> It is possible that Hezbollah forces were functioning as embedded advisors operating on the front lines with regime forces.

Hezbollah fighters were primarily concentrated in the Shi'a villages of Zahra and Nebul north of the city, where they also trained NDF forces.<sup>75</sup> An opposition media source put the number of Hezbollah members deployed to Zahra and Nebul at 200.<sup>76</sup> A separate Hezbollah commander, speaking from Beirut in early June, put the number far higher and claimed there were 2,000 Hezbollah fighters in these towns. This may be an exaggeration, given that it represented a larger force than participated in al-Qusayr. It is possible that this number may also include Iraqi Shi'a fighters or NDF paramilitaries. Iraqi Shi'a militants were also among those fighting on behalf of the regime in Aleppo during this time.<sup>77</sup> It is difficult to confirm the size of the Hezbollah contingent, but it is clear that Hezbollah members were operating in and around Aleppo, and several were killed in the fighting.

The summer offensive in Aleppo failed to have decisive effects in contrast to operations in al-Qusayr. By late June 2013, the regime shifted its focus to consolidating gains in Homs province. In late June, regime forces captured the border town of Tal Kalakh, on the border with northern Lebanon and not far from al-Qusayr.<sup>78</sup> This effectively severed another rebel resupply line in to Syria. On June 29<sup>th</sup>, Assad regime launched an offensive to regain control of the last remaining rebel pockets in Homs city, including the central Khalidiyah and Bab Hud neighborhoods. Hezbollah forces were involved in these operations much in the same way as they were operating in Aleppo. A Hezbollah commander described characterized the group's involvement in Homs as more limited than in al-Qusayr. Hezbollah, he said, was providing specialized military assistance, including communications support, sniper fire, and support from Hezbollah's special forces.<sup>79</sup>

The regime used similar tactics in Homs as in al-Qusayr: rebel strongholds were encircled and bombarded by air strikes and artillery ahead of a ground assault. Regime forces tightened their siege of rebel neighborhoods in June to prevent rebel resupply or escape.<sup>80</sup> In early July, the regime stepped up its bombardment of central Homs for ten days.<sup>81</sup> Over the next three weeks, regime forces cleared the rebel pockets in Homs, with support from Hezbollah and the pro-regime



paramilitary forces. Together, they launched a three-pronged attack of Khalidiyah slowly fighting their way through the neighborhood using tanks, rockets, and mortars.<sup>82</sup> Ultimately, this operational concept proved successful as the regime regained control over Khalidiyah by late July 2013.<sup>83</sup>

Fighters from Hezbollah and NDF forces often led the ground assault into Khalidiyah, according to numerous reports from residents and activists.<sup>84</sup> These claims are supported by the burials of at least four Hezbollah fighters that died fighting in Homs. Those killed in Homs included Khalil Mohammed Hamid Khalil (al-Hajj Haidar), a senior commander who joined Hezbollah in 1986 and had received several commendations from Nasrallah.<sup>85</sup> Another senior Hezbollah fighter killed in Homs was Ahmed Habeeb Saloum, who was serving as a battalion commander in the Abu Fadl al-Abbas Brigade, a pro-regime force comprised of Shi'a militants from Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon (discussed in greater detail below).<sup>86</sup>

In addition to Aleppo and Homs, there were reports of Hezbollah involvement in the southern province of Deraa over the summer months of 2013. According to various news reports, Hezbollah operatives and Iraqi Shi'a militants operated in Bosra al-Sham and Suwayda, towns that have remained supportive of the Assad regime despite rebel gains elsewhere in Deraa.<sup>87</sup> Opposition activists claimed that these

fighters were sent south to try to convince Druze communities to fight against the rebels.<sup>88</sup> The death of an Iraqi militant commander in September 2013 appears to confirm that Shi'a militant forces were assisting the regime in southern Syria.<sup>89</sup> The extent of Hezbollah's activities in the south is unclear on account of limited information in the open source; however, the group had reportedly pulled out of Deraa by October to concentrate on the intensifying battle in Damascus.<sup>90</sup>

## THE FIGHT FOR DAMASCUS

### *Hezbollah and Other Shi'a Militants*

Along with Qusayr, Hezbollah's battlefield contributions have been greatest in Damascus. Lebanese and Iraqi fighters have been battling rebels in the Sayyida Zeinab shrine area of the Syrian capital since early in the conflict. The Sayyida Zeinab shrine entombs the remains of the daughter of the first Shi'a Imam, making it one of the most important Shi'a religious sites and a central image in the increasingly sectarian conflict. The area surrounding the shrine is also key terrain for the Assad Regime. The shrine is located in the southeastern suburbs of Damascus, adjacent to a number of contested areas and not far from the highway to Damascus International Airport. The neighborhood (with its infrastructure designed

to host Shi'a visitors to the shrine) provides an excellent base for pro-regime fighters from which to operate. This has made it difficult for rebels to achieve a contiguous area of control in the eastern and western suburbs and to cut off the regime's access to the airport.

It is difficult to describe Hezbollah's involvement in Damascus separate from a discussion of the Iraqi Shi'a militant groups that frequently fight alongside it. Since early 2012, Shi'a militants from Lebanon, Iraq, Afghanistan, and elsewhere have mobilized to fight in Damascus.<sup>91</sup> Initially, the primary mission of these Shi'a militias was to defend the shrine from attacks by Sunni rebels; however, the regime has relied increasingly on these groups to help clear rebel-held areas elsewhere in the Syrian capital.

The most prominent Shi'a militia operating in Damascus is the Abu Fadl al-Abbas Brigade (AFAB), a pro-government Shi'a militia created in the fall of 2012. AFAB takes its name from the brother of Imam Ali and is comprised of fighters drawn mostly from Iraqi Shi'a militias, as well as Lebanese Hezbollah.<sup>92</sup> The two most notable Iraqi militias are Kataib Hezbollah and Asaib Ahl al-Haq, though militants from Badr Corps, Kataib Sayyid al-Shuhada, Muqtada al-Sadr's Promised Day Brigade (formerly the Jaysh al-Mahdi), and other smaller groups are also fighting in Syria.<sup>93</sup> According to an interview with Abu Hajar, an Iraqi militant and AFAB commander, the group had roughly 500 members at the time of its founding.<sup>94</sup> This number has likely grown with the steady influx fighters recruited mainly from Iraq.<sup>95</sup>

Other mainly Iraqi Shi'a militia groups emerged in Syria over the course of 2013. Liwa Zulfikar is a Shi'a militia that emerged in June and appears to be a close affiliate, since the group appears to overlap with AFAB in their membership and leadership.<sup>96</sup> According to Phillip Smyth, the group may have been created as a result of infighting within AFAB.<sup>97</sup> Other groups include the Liwa al-Imam al-Husayn, which was also created in June 2013. This group operates in Damascus and appears more closely tied to Sadrists militias.<sup>98</sup> All of these groups actively promote their activities and martyrs on Facebook and other social media platforms.

Iran has played an important role in facilitating the involvement of Iraqi militants in Syria. IRGC-QF training and funding of Iraqi groups during the Iraq War enabled the emergence of a disciplined, trained, and experienced cadre of fighters. Iran has also leveraged the growing Shi'a militancy in Iraq that has emerged in response to the increasingly sectarian nature of the conflict in Syria. Iran, through Khamanei's office in Damascus, was involved in the creation of AFAB, according to commanders in the group.<sup>99</sup> Iran has also helped to recruit, arm, pay, and facilitate the movement of Iraqi fighters into Syria, as well as to return the bodies of the dead for burial.<sup>100</sup>

### *Regime Offensives in Damascus*

In the spring of 2013, the Syrian regime began a renewed push to retake rebel-held areas in the suburbs of eastern Damascus. Regime efforts concentrated on Eastern Ghouta, part of a belt of suburban and agricultural areas that surround Damascus and were home to some of the main rebel strongholds. Rebels had expanded their control over eastern Damascus the summer and fall of 2012.<sup>101</sup> Regime forces were unable to oust rebels from these areas, and sought to besiege rebel positions in Eastern Ghouta.

In March and April of 2013, regime forces began a push north from bases near the Damascus International Airport in an attempt to retake towns that served as the eastern gateway into Eastern Ghouta and a key path for rebel resupply.<sup>102</sup> A recent ISW publication analyzes in detail these operations in Damascus, but it is worth noting that Hezbollah and Iraqi Shi'a militants also engaged in the fighting in Eastern Ghouta during the summer months.<sup>103</sup> Activists reported that Hezbollah fighters participated in operations in the Marj al-Sultan area of Eastern Ghouta, and that the group was using a Syrian air force intelligence base at al-Masraf near the airport as a training hub.<sup>104</sup> Militant social media websites also showed Iraqi militants operating in the Shebaa neighborhood, along the Damascus International Airport road.<sup>105</sup>

Over the summer months, Hezbollah and Iraqi militants also fought in the neighborhoods surrounding the Sayyida Zeinab shrine to help secure the southern approaches to the capital. This included the neighborhoods of Zayabiyeh, Babila, Bahdaliyeh, and Hay al Shamalneh, where Lebanese and Iraqi fighters moved into the areas after artillery barrages by regime forces.<sup>106</sup> Other reports describe Hezbollah fighters operating alongside Syrian troops attempting to infiltrate neighborhoods of southwest Damascus such as Muadhamiyah.<sup>107</sup>

Dozens of Hezbollah fighters died in Damascus from June to August 2013, including several senior commanders.<sup>108</sup> Ayman Said Tahini, a senior Hezbollah commander of Lebanese Hezbollah who led an AFAB battalion, was killed in Damascus in mid-July 2013. Several weeks later, rebels ambushed and killed Hossam Ali al-Nasr along with several other Lebanese fighters.<sup>109</sup> Nasr was rumored to be one of the more senior Hezbollah commanders in Syria, though his age (33) may call this into question.<sup>110</sup> Both of these commanders were reportedly killed near Sayyida Zeinab, according to Hezbollah announcements. The presence of these senior commanders near Sayyida Zeinab supports assessments that Hezbollah operates a headquarters in the southern suburbs of Damascus.<sup>111</sup>

Hezbollah fighters were even operating near some of the areas targeted by the regime's major chemical weapons attack on August 21, 2013.<sup>112</sup> The attacks targeted a number of rebel-held

neighborhoods in Eastern Ghouta as well as several contested areas in southwest Damascus near Muadhamiyah. Hezbollah militants were not warned of the assault ahead of time and some fighters fell ill because they were not wearing gas masks, though there do not appear to have been any casualties.<sup>113</sup> In a call intercepted by German intelligence following the attack, a Hezbollah commander chided a contact at the Iranian embassy in Beirut over the Assad regime's use of chemical weapons.<sup>114</sup> Still, Hezbollah maintained its support for the Syrian regime as pressure mounted for an international response to the chemical attacks.

Both Iranian and Hezbollah leadership warned publicly against any potential Western strike on Syria, while privately debating how to respond to a possible attack.<sup>115</sup> Sources close to Hezbollah leadership claimed that the group would launch an attack on Israel in response only to a large-scale attack on Syria, while a more limited strike might elicit attacks on American interests elsewhere in the region, like Iraq.<sup>116</sup> The tense period following the August 21<sup>st</sup> attack even led to accusations from opposition sources that the Syrian regime had transferred its chemical weapons stockpile to Hezbollah in Lebanon ahead of a potential strike.<sup>117</sup> Nasrallah rejected these claims in a televised statement on September 23<sup>rd</sup>, stating that religious reasons prevented his group from owning and using such weapons.<sup>118</sup> Israeli officials lent credence to Nasrallah's denial through statements from its northern commander saying that Hezbollah did not want chemical weapons "as far as [they could] tell."<sup>119</sup> Perhaps more telling is the lack of an Israeli response, which would have likely occurred if there had been a weapons transfer given Israel's previous strikes and statements.

Fear of a U.S. strike on Syria subsided when a deal with Western powers to dismantle Syria's chemical weapons program was reached in mid-September 2013. With greater room to maneuver, the regime launched a new round of operations in the southern Damascus suburbs to encircle rebel positions in Hajar al-Aswad and al-Yarmouk.<sup>120</sup> The regime continued to rely on NDF forces as well as Hezbollah and other Shi'a militants in these operations.

As with Hezbollah's activities elsewhere in Syria, detailed information about Hezbollah's role in these operations is lacking. Videos posted on YouTube by both pro and anti-regime sources claim to show Hezbollah and Iraqi militant forces fighting in eastern and southern Damascus during this time, however many are difficult to verify or analyze. Still, a picture of how these operations unfolded does emerge from accounts of where and when regime military and paramilitary forces fought alongside Hezbollah and Iraqi Shi'a militants in Damascus.

Hezbollah attacks in and around Damascus generally emanated from the Sayyida Zeinab area. The Shebaa area, just east of

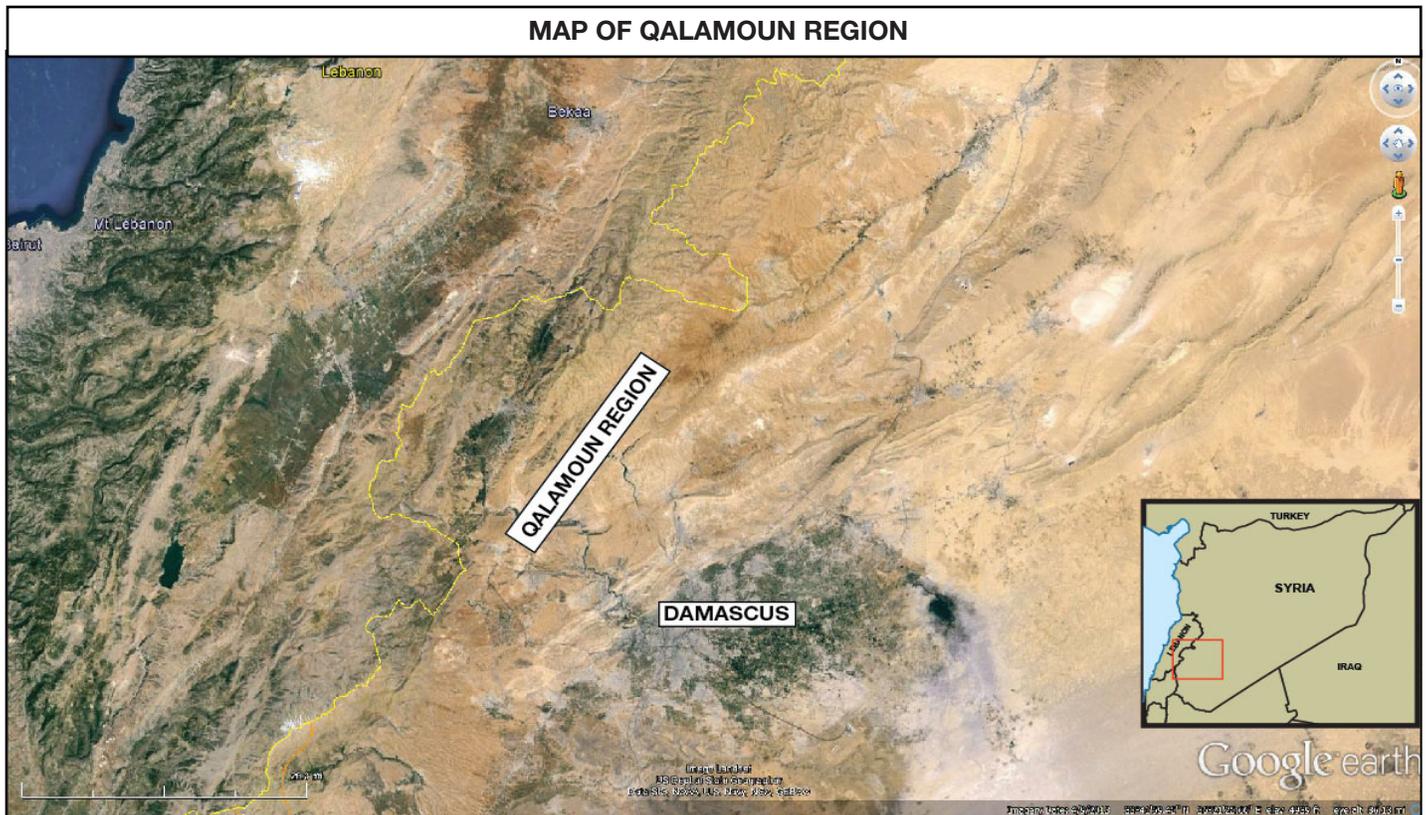
Sayyida Zeinab, was one of the first areas to be recaptured by Syrian forces backed by Hezbollah in late September.<sup>121</sup> Regime forces, again with support from AFAB and Hezbollah, gained control of the Sheikh Omar, al-Boueida, al-Dhiyabiyah and Husseiniyah neighborhoods by mid-October after intense fighting.<sup>122</sup> From there, pro-regime troops pushed into the neighboring Hejeira area as well as Beit Sahm in the second half of October, gaining control of the area in early November.<sup>123</sup> The regime also retook Sbeineh in the first weeks of November with NDF, Hezbollah, and AFAB assistance.<sup>124</sup> Further west, the regime brokered a deal with rebel forces in Muadhamiyah to allow residents to leave the besieged town.<sup>125</sup> The truce broke down almost immediately, and in late November the regime tightened its blockade of the area, which remains in place as of late December.<sup>126</sup> By early December 2013, the regime had effectively consolidated control of the southern flank of Damascus.

Rebel forces launched their own offensive to break the siege of Eastern Ghouta in late November. This brought them into contact with Hezbollah fighters apparently still holding the areas seized by the regime during the summer months. Rebel fighters attacked regime positions on the eastern outskirts of Damascus north of the airport on November 22, 2013.<sup>127</sup> They seized control of several villages including al-Bahariyah, Deir Salman, al-Qaysa, and Marj al-Sultan, in fierce fighting that lasted for days.<sup>128</sup> An unnamed Hezbollah commander said his forces suffered heavy casualties when "our units came under a human wave attack by hundreds of terrorists and rebel fighters."<sup>129</sup> The commander said that rebels ousted Hezbollah from several of its positions in Eastern Ghouta, but he declared that his fighters intended to retake their positions with help from elite Hezbollah units that were being sent as reinforcements.<sup>130</sup>

Rebels launched a second phase of attacks in the Adra and Douma areas northeast of Damascus.<sup>131</sup> Details of these rebel offensives are murky in part due to an opposition media blackout that persisted from the launch of the operation through mid-December.<sup>132</sup> Clashes between pro-regime and rebel forces continued in both Eastern Ghouta and Adra into late December 2013, as both sides are contesting the terrain.<sup>133</sup>

### *Qalamoun*

The Assad regime sought to follow up on its successes in Damascus and Homs with an offensive to clear the mountainous Qalamoun area, which lies between the two cities along the border with Lebanon. Qalamoun is 50 miles from north to south, and 25 miles wide. The population of the area is mixed, and contains several small Christian villages. A major highway runs through the area, linking Damascus to Homs and making it important terrain for securing the regime's freedom of movement north of the capital to its coastal



strongholds. The area is also home to a number of military bases, some of which have fallen to rebels.<sup>134</sup> Qalamoun has also functioned as a rebel support zone from which to launch attacks on regime positions along Damascus's northern flank and to provide logistical support to opposition fighters in Eastern Ghouta.<sup>135</sup>

Qalamoun is also strategic terrain for Hezbollah, because it has hosted a rebel system that threatens Hezbollah strongholds across the border in Lebanon. Rebels have controlled several towns throughout Qalamoun since mid-2012, including Yabrud, Nabk, and Rankous.<sup>136</sup> Opposition forces have used the area to transit supplies and fighters to and from Aarsal, a predominantly Sunni town just across the border in Lebanon that has been sympathetic to Syrian rebels.

Observers had suspected that Qalamoun would be the focus of regime clearing operations right after the operation in al-Qusayr. Indeed, after al-Qusayr fell to the Assad regime, many rebel fighters fled to Qalamoun. The number of opposition fighters increased with an influx of rebels, including al-Qaeda linked militants, over the course of the summer months. It is likely that fighting in Aleppo, Homs, and Damascus during the summer and early fall delayed the Qalamoun offensive until late 2013 because the regime lacked the capability to contend with a rebel force estimated at between 25,000 and 30,000.<sup>137</sup>

Hezbollah has taken the lead in the Qalamoun offensive on account of several factors. First, like al-Qusayr, Qalamoun's proximity to the Bekaa Valley makes it a security imperative for Hezbollah and therefore a fight that is more easily justifiable to its supporters. Second, Hezbollah is more comfortable and capable operating just across the border because it presents fewer logistical challenges. Third, Qalamoun's mountainous terrain is more suited to the style of guerilla warfare that Hezbollah has employed against the Israelis in southern Lebanon. The regime's tanks and armored vehicles are of little use in the terrain and opposition anti-tank weapons taken from captured military bases pose a serious threat.<sup>138</sup> Fourth, Assad's forces were spread too thinly and under too much strain to effectively lead the Qalamoun offensive.<sup>139</sup> The Syrian Army would instead provide artillery and airstrikes from nearby bases where needed in support of Hezbollah ground forces.<sup>140</sup>

The mountainous terrain has made for a different type of fight in Qalamoun than in the other areas where Hezbollah has operated. The overall operational concept for Qalamoun, however, is familiar. Pro-regime forces plan to encircle individual towns, to cut all supplies, water, and electricity to the area, to conduct an artillery and aerial bombardment, and then to launch a ground attack.<sup>141</sup> The main difference is the scale: Hezbollah will operate on at the village level using special forces units trained for mountain warfare.<sup>142</sup> Another key difference from al-Qusayr is the pace of operations.

Hezbollah commanders said they expected a slower tempo for the offensive, which could last well into the spring of 2014.<sup>143</sup>

Ahead of the operation, Qalamoun was divided into four geographic areas, each with numbered sectors. Hezbollah fighters took lead in the northern, western, and southern parts of Qalamoun near the border with Lebanon; and the Syrian Army would play a larger role in the towns along the highway in the eastern part.<sup>144</sup> According to reporter Nicholas Blanford, who spoke with several Hezbollah fighters about the offensive, “Hezbollah intends to slowly select targets and eliminate them or drive them into pre-selected kill zones... [and] the campaign’s success [will] depend on extensive reconnaissance, real-time intelligence and good coordination with air assets and artillery.”<sup>145</sup>

The offensive in Qalamoun picked up in mid-November 2013, with a regime push along the main highway from north to south. Qara, a town on the highway in northern Qalamoun, was one of the earliest targets. The regime closed checkpoints around Qara and began an artillery and aerial bombardment of the village on November 15<sup>th</sup>.<sup>146</sup> Regime forces, with ground support from Hezbollah fighters, reportedly captured the town three days later.<sup>147</sup> Pro-regime forces pressed southward towards the village of Deir Attiyah, which fell in late November.<sup>148</sup> Syrian and Hezbollah forces also fought for control of the village of Nabk for several weeks.<sup>149</sup> The regime captured the town in mid-December. They then pressed south towards Yabrud, launching a renewed offensive against the town in late February 2014.

The Yabrud offensive began with clearing operations in the town’s surrounding areas in order to isolate rebels in Yabrud from their supply lines, a tactic that was used in the battle for al-Qusayr. Regime air strikes and bombardments concentrated on the Rima Farms which lie in the outskirts of Yabrud as Hezbollah and regime forces advanced from the north.<sup>150</sup> Hezbollah played a leading role as it has throughout the regime’s Qalamoun operations, particularly in reconnaissance missions, which allowed regime forces to identify and target rebel ground lines of communication between Yabrud and Aarsal in Lebanon. The final attack began on March 14, 2014, when Hezbollah fighters conducted a diversionary operation from the west and north before pro-regime forces launched the main attack from the east.<sup>151</sup> A passage was left open for rebel withdrawal either to the south of Yabrud leading to south-western towns and village of Qalamoun or northwest into Lebanon.<sup>152</sup> With the regime in control of much of the highway, the fighting has continued in southern and eastern Qalamoun, where many rebels have fled.

Hezbollah’s growing combat role in both Qalamoun and Damascus is reflected in the spike in casualties in the late fall. There is a noticeable increase in Hezbollah deaths in

November and December. Hezbollah-linked websites and social media pages listed announced the deaths of at least 60 Hezbollah fighters in November and December 2013 alone.<sup>153</sup> More than two-dozen were killed in one week in late November during the rebel offensive in Eastern Ghouta.<sup>154</sup> This is a threefold increase from the number of identified fighters that were killed in September and October, though it is still well below the losses sustained during the al-Qusayr offensive.<sup>155</sup> This may suggest that Hezbollah is either not operating on the front lines in the same numbers, or that they are operating in a different capacity. Some of these casualties reportedly came after Syrian Army troops abandoned their Hezbollah counterparts on the battlefield, leaving them surrounded by rebel forces.<sup>156</sup> This has generated mistrust between Hezbollah fighters and their Syrian counterparts.

Among the dead were several Hezbollah commanders, including Wifaq Sharafeddine and Ali Hussein Bazzi. Lebanese media identified Sharafeddine as “the most prominent field commander in Damascus,” who was nicknamed Sayyed Nasrallah, a reference to Hezbollah’s overall leader.<sup>157</sup> Some reports said he was killed in the rebel offensive in Eastern Ghouta in late November, while others placed him in Qalamoun.<sup>158</sup> Bazzi, also reported to be a high-ranking Hezbollah commander, died along with another field commander Ali Saleh in mid-December in the Qalamoun area.<sup>159</sup>

## HEZBOLLAH’S ORGANIZATION IN SYRIA

Hezbollah has retained a high degree of secrecy about the size, organization, and activities of its fighters in Syria. Still, it is possible to assess the group’s involvement in Syria from the open source accounts of Hezbollah’s presence referenced in the narrative above.

Estimates on the size of Hezbollah’s contingent in Syria vary widely. Opposition claims tend to inflate the size of the Lebanese militant group’s presence in Syria. Hezbollah sources tend to play down their numbers in Syria, while exaggerating the size of their military force in Lebanon to deter Israel. What is evident is that Hezbollah’s Syrian commitment has grown in absolute terms over the last 12 months, as the group has taken on greater combat and training roles in more places across the country.

French Foreign Minister Laurent Fabius said that his country’s intelligence service estimated there were 3,000-4,000 fighters from Hezbollah operating in Syria by late May 2013.<sup>160</sup> Israeli security sources estimated between 4,000 and 5,000 fighters in June 2013.<sup>161</sup> Regional security officials told Reuters in September 2013 that there were between 2,000 and 4,000 Hezbollah fighters in Syria and that this

included both elite fighters and reservists.<sup>162</sup> If these numbers are correct, this is a sizeable commitment for a force that has roughly 5,000 active fighters and 15,000 reservists.<sup>163</sup>

Hezbollah has utilized its active and reserve personnel to sustain this commitment. This has lessened the strain on the group's active duty force, while giving reservists valuable combat experience. Hezbollah also rotates fighters into and out of Syria at intervals. These rotations grew longer as the fighting intensified. Initially, the duration for fighters in Syria was seven days. Rotations were extended to 20 days during the offensive in al-Qusayr, and by the fall of 2013, Hezbollah fighters deployed from Lebanon on month-long rotations. The lengthening deployments were likely an effort to relieve some of the burden of Hezbollah's growing battlefield presence. It is also probably a practical move to avoid the disruption caused by rotating units in the middle of clearing operations. It is unclear how long these extended deployments will continue, but it is likely that Hezbollah will seek to shorten them as soon as battlefield conditions warrant.

The location and scope of Hezbollah's involvement has evolved as the result of several factors. The religious importance of the Sayyida Zeinab shrine was a driver of Hezbollah's early involvement, but other considerations have taken greater priority. When Hezbollah decided in the spring of 2013 that it could not allow Assad to fail in Syria, the group effectively committed to operating in areas not directly related to its own security.

Consequently, Hezbollah has moved beyond training and defensive missions and now conducts offensive operations on behalf of the Syrian regime. Over the last year, the group has led large-scale offensives in areas that are most directly related to its own security, namely areas along the border like al-Qusayr and Qalamoun. But it has also operated further afield in Syria, such as in Aleppo or Deraa provinces, albeit in smaller numbers. As mentioned earlier, Hezbollah brings important capabilities to the fight, and this too has widened the geographic scope of Hezbollah's involvement. Hezbollah has played an integral role in the regime's ability to clear urban terrain in Damascus, Homs, and al-Qusayr and to conduct counter-insurgency operations in the mountain of Qalamoun.

There are different ways that Hezbollah operates at the tactical level in Syria. First, Hezbollah fighters train NDF paramilitaries at military bases across Syria. As previously discussed, this training has proved instrumental in cultivating a light infantry force that can help the regime hold cleared terrain.

Hezbollah fighters have also augmented Syrian forces on the battlefield. One way they do this is as advisers and trainers for the Syrian military and paramilitary forces, either in an

embedded or partnered capacity. Hezbollah fighters have also led units comprised of Iraqi Shi'a militants, especially in Damascus. Often, Hezbollah forces are far better trained, disciplined, and experienced than their Syrian or Iraqi counterparts. Hezbollah fighters improve combat effectiveness when partnered with less-capable Syrian units. One Hezbollah fighter described this effect: "When we first started helping the Syrians, it was true they had big problems with their army... they had no skill, no discipline and no leadership. Now, the men they have left have learned a lot and are very serious fighters. They've become more like Hezbollah."<sup>164</sup> Both Syrian and Iraqi fighters have also benefitted from the much-needed morale boost that Hezbollah fighters provide.<sup>165</sup>

At times, Hezbollah does not simply offer advice; it issues orders. For example, during the fighting in Homs, Hezbollah commanders were even given tactical control over small units of Syrian soldiers.<sup>166</sup> This may be a more common occurrence. An unnamed Syrian officer in a presidential guard unit stated that "Whenever we are fighting with Hizballah, they take the command and we provide logistics."<sup>167</sup>

In the case of al-Qusayr, Hezbollah operated as the main military force. Hezbollah planned and led the offensive, in which large numbers of Hezbollah fighters operated as cohesive units. The Syrian military role is limited to logistical, artillery, and aerial support. Yet, al-Qusayr has proved more the exception than the rule, and it is more common for Hezbollah to operate in conjunction with Syrian and Iraqi forces.

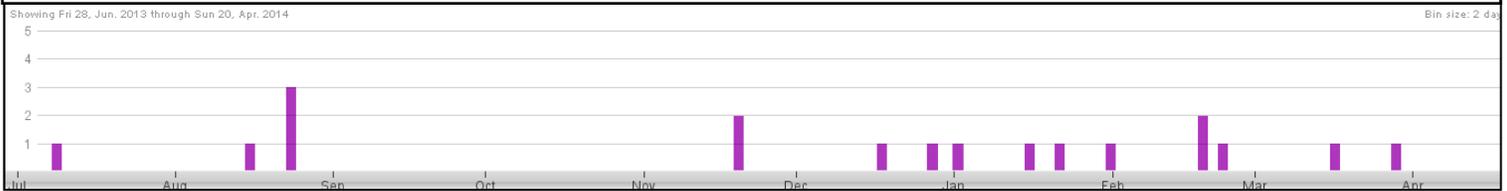
A Hezbollah fighter who fought in al-Qusayr and Damascus summed up Hezbollah's approach in an interview with a Lebanese journalist in October. He said:

*"Whether Hezbollah leads certain operations or not depends on the nature of the terrain and the battle. In a recent battle in the suburbs of Damascus, we fought alongside the [Iraqi] Abou Fadl Abbas brigade and led the onslaught. In other operations, we handle the whole process from the reconnaissance to the clean-up work. However, the Syrian Arab Army, which operated previously as a conventional army, has now received training in guerilla warfare. Its men are now handling the onslaught on many fronts."<sup>168</sup>*

At the tactical level, Hezbollah exercises command and control over its fighters in Syria. Hezbollah's casualties have included a number of field commanders. Among them were a handful of senior Hezbollah operatives, including one veteran who was captured by Israel in 1991 and held for 14 years until his release in a prisoner swap in 2004. But the coordination of air and artillery with infantry movement also suggests that Hezbollah command and control is closely linked to the Syrian armed forces which control those resources.<sup>169</sup>

Hezbollah also coordinates closely with Syrian and Iranian commanders at the operational and strategic level. The IRGC-QF and Syrian military high command operate a

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headquarters in Damascus where they coordinate operations across the country.<sup>170</sup> A senior Hezbollah commander is also co-located at this headquarters, along with a coordinator for Iraq’s Shi’a militants.<sup>171</sup> Soleimani has shaped the strategy in Syria at the highest levels, though he is not present day-to-day.<sup>172</sup> This may be a role filled by General Hamedani, who has played an integral part formulating strategy and directing operations in Syria during 2013 and early 2014.<sup>173</sup>

The identity of the senior-most Hezbollah commander in Syria is unknown. It is possible that Mustafa Badr al-Din, who replaced Imad Mughniyeh as the head of Hezbollah’s security apparatus following the latter’s death in 2008, or Talal Hamiyah, the head of Hezbollah’s Unit 910, are involved in high-level coordination on Syria.<sup>174</sup>

More information about dynamics within this headquarters is not available in the open source. Yet, the results of the coordination are evident enough on the battlefield. The strategy of prioritized and sequenced offensives adopted at the beginning of 2013 successfully shifted battlefield momentum in the regime’s favor.

**IMPLICATIONS OF HEZBOLLAH’S INVOLVEMENT IN SYRIA**

*Politics and Security in Lebanon*

Hezbollah’s acknowledgement of and justification for its involvement in Syria has had important consequences on Hezbollah’s standing within Lebanon as well as on security and stability within the country. Nasrallah continues to portray Hezbollah’s involvement in Syria as a confrontation with Israel, the West, and Sunni extremists. The Syrian regime is not only the backbone of the resistance, he argues, but it is also the front line in the defense against the spread of Sunni extremism into Lebanon. This justification has bolstered enthusiasm for involvement in Syria amongst many of Hezbollah’s supporters in Lebanon.<sup>175</sup> Support for Hezbollah is especially high in the group’s Bekaa Valley strongholds because they are often the targets of rebel rocket attacks fired from across the border.<sup>176</sup> More affluent and educated residents of Beirut have been more skeptical of Hezbollah’s involvement in Syria.<sup>177</sup>

Still, not all Lebanese Shi’a support Hezbollah’s activities in Syria. In May, a group of anti-Hezbollah Shi’a affiliated protested in front of the Iranian Embassy in Beirut.<sup>178</sup> Suspected Hezbollah supporters attacked the rally, and one protester was shot and later died.<sup>179</sup> There are also reports that support in southern Lebanon for Hezbollah’s Syrian role has eroded as casualties have mounted.<sup>180</sup>

Other groups within Lebanon have also denounced the group’s involvement in Syria. Politicians from Lebanon’s March 14 coalition, who have long opposed Hezbollah, have been especially strident in their criticism of involvement in Syria.<sup>181</sup> In early August, Lebanon’s president Michel Sulieman called on the state to rein in Hezbollah’s ability to conduct unilateral military actions. This was the first time he made such comments, which expressed the frustration felt by many Christian and Sunni politicians.<sup>182</sup> Hezbollah’s role in Syria has also tarnished its image across the Middle East.<sup>183</sup> Despite this, Hezbollah has waged that the reputational risks are lower than the cost of inaction in Syria and Assad’s potential fall.



Opposition is greatest with Lebanon's Sunni community, which view Hezbollah as choosing sides in sectarian conflict, killing fellow Muslims, and losing sight of its resistance to Israel. Salafism and support for al-Qaeda linked rebel groups has increased in Lebanon's Palestinian refugee camps, namely Ein el-Hilweh.<sup>184</sup> Relations between Hezbollah and Hamas, which were traditionally strong due to both groups opposition to Israel, became especially strained following al-Qusayr.<sup>185</sup> Rumors even circulated that Hezbollah had asked Hamas to leave Lebanon, though Hamas denied this was true.<sup>186</sup> Hamas did acknowledge in May 2013 that Iran had cut its funding over its support for rebels in Syria.<sup>187</sup>

Nasrallah sought to shore up support amongst Hezbollah's base while answering his critics in a speech on August 2, 2013, saying his organization had not lost sight of its resistance against Israel.<sup>188</sup> Around the time of the speech, Hezbollah and Hamas began a rapprochement, indicating that their shared objectives towards Israel have taken precedence over the conflict in Syria.<sup>189</sup> On the whole, Hezbollah's core constituency remains supportive of the group's activities in Syria, but a prolonged struggle and increased casualties may erode some backing for these efforts.

Growing sectarian tensions have directly impacted security and stability in Lebanon. There have been a series of attacks against Hezbollah strongholds since the group expanded its involvement in Syria in May. Two rockets struck the Dahiyeh in southern Beirut on May 26, 2013, a day after Nasrallah declared his group's full commitment to the fight in Syria.<sup>190</sup> A car bomb detonated in Dahiyeh in mid-July, wounding more than 50.<sup>191</sup> The largest attack occurred on August 15, 2013, when a car bomb detonated in a Hezbollah neighborhood of southern Beirut killing 18 people and wounding nearly 300 more.<sup>192</sup> Car bombs also struck the Iranian Embassy and the Chatah neighborhood in southern Beirut in November and December, respectively.<sup>193</sup> In the wake of these incidents, Hezbollah tightened security in its strongholds, along with assistance from the Lebanon's security forces, but the attacks persisted.<sup>194</sup> In early 2014, car bombs against Hezbollah and Iranian targets continued to escalate. In the first two months of 2014, four car bombs targeted Hezbollah strongholds in the Dahiyeh and Hermel.<sup>195</sup> On February 19, 2014, a twin suicide car bomb attack struck the Iranian cultural center and an army checkpoint in the southern suburbs of Beirut, killing six and injuring 129 people.<sup>196</sup>

The Bekaa Valley is another area impacted by spillover from Syria. Tit-for-tat violence between Shi'a and Sunni areas has been common over the last 12 months. Anti-regime fighters have fired rockets from Syria that have targeted Hermel, a Shi'a village in Bekaa where Hezbollah enjoys support, since the spring of 2013.<sup>197</sup> Residents of Hermel have retaliated with attacks against Aarsal, a predominantly Sunni village in Bekaa that is a bastion of rebel support.<sup>198</sup> Militants in Aarsal

have also launched attacks on Lebanese Army soldiers in the area.<sup>199</sup> The Syrian regime has also launched cross-border air attacks on the town, which has prompted retaliatory fire from the Lebanese Army.<sup>200</sup> Elsewhere in Syria, the conflict in Syria has also worsened the sectarian fighting that has long raged in Tripoli and led to a violent confrontation in the southern city of Sidon between supporters of a Salafist cleric Ahmad al-Assir and Hezbollah supporters.<sup>201</sup> The Lebanese Army intervened to stop the fighting in late June 2013, losing a dozen soldiers in the clashes.<sup>202</sup>

The attacks against Hezbollah strongholds in Lebanon have increased fears of spillover in Lebanon, and the bombings have made the threat of Sunni extremism an even greater reality. They have not, however, seemed to undermine Hezbollah's resolve to fight in Syria, at least for now.<sup>203</sup> Hezbollah remains committed to fighting in Syria, and this calculus is unlikely to change on account of this threat unless there is an increase in the frequency or lethality of attacks in Lebanon, or high casualties in Syria undermine domestic support.

### *Syria and the Axis of Resistance*

The results of Hezbollah's commitment to Syria are especially evident on the ground. Hezbollah and Iran's deepening commitment in 2013 was essential for the reversal of the Assad regime's fortunes. It is unlikely that Syrian forces would have been able to make the gains it did in Qusayr, Homs, Qalamoun and Damascus without Hezbollah's expertise and numbers. Aside from its combat role, Hezbollah's involvement in training the NDF has enabled the regime to bring larger and more effective fighters to bear in the fight. Hezbollah has proven its value as an increasingly deployable asset for Iran, which can also be used to train up additional resistance forces, such as Iraqi Shi'a militants, that could be brought to bear for future conflicts.

Hezbollah's involvement in Syria has deepened the relationship between the Axis of Resistance members and represents a continued convergence of strategic objectives regionally. At the same time, the partnership is becoming more uneven as a result of the conflict in Syria. The Assad regime owes a great deal to Iran and Syria, and will likely be less of an independent actor moving forward as it has in the past.

### *Hezbollah as a Fighting Force*

The conflict in Syria has affected Hezbollah's military arm positively and negatively. Hezbollah fighters are gaining valuable combat experience in Syria. They have employed the tactics that they have trained on over the past few years with an eye towards the next conflict with Israel. Hezbollah now has a cadre of fighters that has experience conducting

offensive operations in urban environments. And the rotation of fighters into Syria has given its newer recruits or reservists experience on the battlefield. Moreover, Hezbollah units have also gained experience coordinating with allied forces in combat, as well as logistical sustainment over longer periods.<sup>204</sup>

There are several drawbacks of its prolonged commitment to Syria. First, the fighting in Syria diverts attention and resources from its focus on resistance against Israel. If a conflict were to break out along Lebanon's southern border, Hezbollah may be in a difficult position of having to recall fighters from Syria. That said, the organization has taken mitigating steps by increasing the recruitment and training of its fighters.<sup>205</sup> In the event of a broadening of the conflict, Hezbollah would also likely mobilize a large portion of its reserve force to relieve the burden, something it threatened to do in the event of a strike on Syria following the August 2013 chemical weapons attacks.<sup>206</sup>

Another military drawback of the fighting in Syria is the casualties sustained on the battlefield. The group has lost hundreds of its elite fighters over the last year, with many more likely wounded. Hezbollah's killed in Syria have included veteran military commanders. A number of these individuals had fought against Israeli troops during the 1980s and 1990s, and brought years of combat experience to conflict in Syria. Still, it is important to note that Hezbollah's casualties are far fewer than those of Syrian military and paramilitary forces, which reportedly number over 50,000.<sup>207</sup>

Hezbollah's continued commitment to Syria suggests that the group believes the benefits of its involvement outweigh the costs. The question is whether and for how long Hezbollah will sustain its activities. At the time, many observers thought al-Qusayr represented a new model for Hezbollah's involvement in Syria. Yet, the fact that al-Qusayr was more of an exception suggests there are limits to Hezbollah's ability and willingness to operate further afield in Syria. Still, Hezbollah has maintained thousands of deployed fighters for more than six months without obvious or significant deleterious effects on the movement.

Nor are there indications that Hezbollah plans to significantly decrease its commitment to Syria in the near term. Nasrallah reaffirmed in November 2013 that his organization would stay in Syria "as long as the reasons [to fight in Syria] remain."<sup>208</sup> Hezbollah may believe its commitment is sustainable at present levels as long as casualties remain low and the military campaign proves successful. Despite deteriorating security in Lebanon since the beginning of the conflict, Hezbollah has maintained its commitment to its mission in Syria. The movement may also calculate that it will be able to reduce its presence as the size and capability of Syria's military and paramilitary forces grow under Hezbollah and Iran's tutelage.

The Assad Regime began 2014 in a much stronger position than a year before. Gains against rebel forces in Damascus and Qalamoun solidified the regime's control of the corridor stretching from Damascus to Homs and coastal Syria by March 2014. Such progress would not have been possible without Hezbollah's battlefield contributions over the previous year. Yet, the most important implications of Hezbollah's involvement in Syria are not just limited to the current conflict.

The fighting in Syria over the past year has accelerated the creation of a sizeable and trained force of Hezbollah, Iranian, Syrian, and Iraqi fighters. This force is now interoperable in ways not previously seen. Hezbollah, the IRGC-QF, and the Syrian Army have become more experienced not only in joint training and planning, but have also learned how to better operate alongside each other as a unified fighting force. At the same time, Hezbollah has also helped to develop and integrate a cadre of Iraqi and Syrian militia fighters into their operations on a large scale. Iran has also gained valuable lessons in guerilla warfare that it can integrate into its own doctrine and training. The conflict in Syria, which began as a major test of the Axis of Resistance, has, in fact, made it a more integrated and capable fighting force. The ability for Iranian, Hezbollah, and Iraqi fighters to deploy across borders to conduct sustained operations in varied terrain has given Iran and its allies an important tool by which to advance their interests. It is for this reason that Hezbollah's role in Syria is such an important development and one that is no doubt alarming for Hezbollah and Iran's regional rivals.



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