

A Decade of Decisions: Lebanon and Syria, from the Second Lebanon War to the Syrian Civil War

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The Syrian-Lebanese sphere of the past decade has been marked by two wars: the Second Lebanon War between Israel and Hezbollah in the summer of 2006; and the Syrian civil war, which started in March 2011 and has no end in sight. The two wars represent significant milestones as well as formative experiences for both Lebanon and Syria, and their impact will be felt for many years to come.

When it ended, the Second Lebanon War was seen as the finest hour of Hezbollah and, even more so, of Bashar Assad, who appropriated the Shiite organization's achievements in its confrontation with Israel without firing a single shot. By contrast, the Syrian civil war has been a crisis for Hezbollah within and outside of Lebanon, but more than anything it has resulted in an existential crisis for the Syrian President: on more than one occasion in the first five years of the civil war, it seemed that Bashar Assad's fate was sealed and that his days at the helm of the regime were numbered. But neither war was simply about the personal fate of Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah or Syrian President Assad, but was rather above all the fate – or, more precisely, the existence – of Lebanon and Syria as state entities.

Seemingly, the two wars were events that revolved around two separate, parallel axes: the first turned on the relationship between Israel and Hezbollah-Syria, with Iran hovering in the background, while the second was the result of an essentially domestic crisis with socioeconomic roots that erupted in Syria and crossed over into Lebanon. But in fact, the two events are

linked, certainly in terms of their geostrategic significance. Both wars are manifestations of the inherent weakness of state players in the region, i.e., the Arab states of the Middle East. These states have been weakened and in some cases have all but disappeared, leaving in their wake a vacuum filled by semi-state organizations such as Hezbollah and Hamas. These organizations have themselves been dragged into confrontations, whether external (against Israel in the case of the Second Lebanon War in the summer of 2006) or internal (in the case of the Syrian civil war raging since the spring of 2011). At the same time, the Second Lebanon War and the Syrian civil war and their outcomes reflect the fact that the Arab-Israeli conflict no longer occupies center stage, and demonstrates the inability of leaders and states in the Arab world to translate their achievements in the conflict against Israel into domestic currency for use with their audiences at home because of the internal challenges they face.

An even more important fact is that these two events are a blatant demonstration of Iran's penetration into the Levant as part of its drive to attain regional hegemony. This ambition is attended by Iran's willingness to generate friction with Israel and even an indirect conflict with it (as proven by the Second Lebanon War), as well as friction over Syria with the Sunni Arab world, including Turkey. In fact, the Second Lebanon War and the Syrian civil war have strengthened Iran's presence in the region, even if the wars have taken a steep toll of Hassan Nasrallah and Bashar Assad, Tehran's local clients. The situation presents Israel with a dilemma as to the right response to the challenge generated by Iran.

The Second Lebanon War: The First Israeli-Iranian War

Once the Second Lebanon War was over, Hezbollah secretary general Hassan Nasrallah wasted no time in describing it as a historic, "divine" victory over Israel. According to Nasrallah, the war was a turning point in the Arab-Israeli struggle, which from then on would continue under the banner of Arab victories that would bring about the end of Israel.¹ Bashar Assad, Nasrallah's ally, rushed to appropriate the victory that he claimed Hezbollah had won against Israel. He also hinted that Syria might adopt the organization's path – armed resistance, or *al-muqawama* – and apply it along the Golan Heights, where until then Syria had been careful to maintain peace and quiet, in order to force Israel to return it.²

Others, both in Israel and especially in the Arab world, chose to view the Second Lebanon War not as another round of Arab-Israeli fighting – the sixth – but as the first war between Israel and Iran. They contended that this time Hezbollah was fighting Tehran’s war as Tehran’s proxy and in Tehran’s service, rather than as a Lebanese or even an Arab element.³ Evidence of this approach could be found in the willingness of many Lebanese, even Shiites, to oppose Hezbollah during the war itself, albeit not publicly, as indicated by documents of the United States embassy in Beirut later exposed by WikiLeaks.⁴ Other evidence is the quiet support of Israel by many Arab states, especially the Gulf states, in its struggle against Hezbollah and Iran.

Nasrallah, Assad, and Iran: Whose Victory?

Hezbollah’s main achievement in the Second Lebanon War was its ability to survive the Israeli onslaught and continue to rain down missiles on Israel until the very last day. The organization thus managed to exploit the gap between the Israeli government’s rhetoric, which had promised the organization’s complete annihilation, and the country’s inability to realize so far-reaching and patently unrealistic a goal (certainly given Israel’s reluctance to launch a ground offensive inside Lebanese territory). After the end of the fighting, Lebanese Druze leader Walid Jumblatt said the war had given Hezbollah undisputed preeminence inside Lebanon, because if Israel had failed in its attempt to strike at the organization, one could not expect any of the organization’s Lebanese enemies to do so.⁵

Bashar Assad’s great achievement after the Second Lebanon War was his emergence from the isolation and embargo the United States had imposed on him before the war broke out. In the period preceding the war, Assad was targeted by the George W. Bush administration for not having aligned himself on the right side in the “war on terrorism” declared by the United States after 9/11, and for his defiant posture against the US invasion of Iraq in 2003. The Syrian President paid the price for his policy in Lebanon: the United States used the assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq al-Hariri in February 2005 to force Syria to withdraw its troops from Lebanon, thereby bringing Syria’s long rule in Lebanon to a close.

After the Second Lebanon War, many in Israel latched onto the belief, perhaps illusion, that Bashar Assad would no longer be the source of all troubles in the region and could even serve as a partner in resolving them. This belief-cum-illusion was based on the assumption that Assad could

serve as a positive, restraining influence vis-à-vis Hezbollah and Iran, which had become the main threat to Israel and the moderate Arab states in the region, and that it was therefore necessary to try to win him over. Another assumption was that severing Syria from the allegiance with Iran and Hezbollah could significantly weaken Tehran's hold on the Levant and reduce its ability to rebuild Hezbollah's military power. However, since the Second Lebanon War, Hezbollah has in practice actually grown in strength: its missile arsenal increased from 12,000-18,000 to about 100,000 in the decade after the war, and some of these missiles have ranges that cover all of Israel with far greater levels of accuracy and destructive power than any that served the organization in 2006.⁶

Against this background, it is no surprise that as early as 2008, then-Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert reached out to the Syrian regime in an attempt to reach a peace agreement with Damascus that would dissolve "the axis of evil" – the partnership among Syria, Iran, and Hezbollah.⁷ Even in Washington in the post-George W. Bush era, President Barack Obama hurried to thaw relations with the Syrian President. In the end, Israel's peace overtures to Syria failed to generate an Israeli-Syrian peace agreement because of the gap between the sides regarding Damascus's demand that Israel withdraw to the banks of the Sea of Galilee. US relations with Syria also remained frozen.

The Second Lebanon War represented a meaningful change in the internal balance of power within the axis of evil, although the start of this change began before the war. In this three-way alliance, Iran began to set the tone and lead the way, turning Hassan Nasrallah into the most significant local power in the axis and Bashar Assad into the junior, almost tag-along partner among the three parties.

Until Assad's ascent to power in June 2000, Syria had been the entity that set the tone in everything having to do with Lebanon, including Iran's presence there. Syria had a military presence in Lebanon and controlled the country with an iron fist, while more than once exerting a moderating influence on Hezbollah. Moreover, all the political powers in Lebanon subordinated themselves to Damascus and even conducted their communications with Hezbollah through Syria. When Bashar Assad became President, it seemed that the young leader fell captive to the charms of Hezbollah's leader and especially the charms of Hezbollah's triumphs against Israel (in particular the organization's success in prompting a unilateral Israeli withdrawal from Lebanon in May 2000). After Syria was compelled to remove its forces from

Lebanon in the spring of 2005, Hezbollah finally crawled out from under Syria's shadow, and together with Iran, became the entity that helped Assad withstand the United States pressure on him. The Second Lebanon War intensified this trend, increasing the personal, political, and even military dependence of the Syrian President on Iran and Hezbollah.⁸

The outbreak of the Syrian civil war in March 2011 was a direct continuation of this trend and brought it to a head. Given the threat to his regime, Bashar Assad was forced to call on Hezbollah and later the Iranian Revolutionary Guards for help. Hezbollah first entered the fighting in Syria in April 2013 in the town of Qusayr, in the western part of the country north of Lebanon, and has since then been sent to fight elsewhere throughout the country. Iranian Revolutionary Guards joined the fighting in September 2015.⁹ The arrival of the Iranian troops came in tandem with the appearance of Russian fighter jets in Syria, sent to help Assad in his war against the rebels. The Syrian President's ability to survive as head of the regime and even turn the tables on his enemies has therefore been greatly – perhaps decisively – dependent on Iran and Hezbollah's willingness to come to his aid.

One of the manifestations of the reversal in status in the triangle of relations with Syria was the attempt of Iran and Hezbollah to entrench themselves on the Golan Heights front and from there build a base of activity against Israel. This was their way of trying to turn the Golan Heights into a playground for attacking Israel, which would have obviated their need to operate against Israel from along the Israeli-Lebanese border. Iran and Hezbollah were afraid that any attack from Lebanon would trigger a harsh Israeli response, including attacks aimed at the Shiite population in southern Lebanon. And, in fact, Hezbollah has been careful to preserve the calm along the Israeli-Lebanese border since the Second Lebanon War.

Israel has worked hard against Iranian and Hezbollah attempts to acquire a hold on the Golan Heights, as evidenced by the assassination of Hezbollah commander Jihad Mughniyeh and a group of combatants in January 2015 near Quneitra, an operation attributed to Israel, and the December 2015 killing in Damascus of the released prisoner Samir Kuntar, who was sent by Hezbollah to recruit the Druze of the Syrian Golan Heights to operate against Israel, another operation attributed to Israel.¹⁰ These assassinations resulted in Hezbollah's reaction in the Har Dov (Shab'a Farms) region, in the triangle between Israel, Syria, and Lebanon. After the killing of Mughniyeh, Hezbollah attacked an Israeli patrol in that sector, killing two soldiers.¹¹

In practice, since Iran and Hezbollah's power and status have grown stronger in Syria, the Golan Heights front – in fact, Syria in general – has become a playground against Israel as far as Hassan Nasrallah and Qassem Suleimani, the commander of the Quds Force of the Revolutionary Guards, are concerned. This state of affairs replaced the situation that had prevailed during the rule of Hafez Assad, Bashar's father, who since the end of the Yom Kippur War had turned all of Lebanon into his playground against Israel.

The Sunni-Shiite Rift

Iran's desire for regional hegemony and the formation of a sphere of influence from Tehran, through Baghdad and Damascus, to Beirut has aroused tensions in its relations with the Arab world as well as Turkey. These tensions deepened the abyss created by the worsening Sunni-Shiite rift that has characterized the Middle East in recent years and has found varied expressions: in Iraq, which became a state controlled by a Shiite majority that marginalizes the Sunni minority, formerly the ruling element in Iraq; in Hezbollah's desire for hegemony in Lebanon at the expense of the Sunnis; in the Sunni-Shiite tension in the Gulf and Yemen; and, finally, in the Sunni struggle to topple the regime of Bashar Assad, a member of the Alawite group supported by Iran and Hezbollah.

All of these have made what was once a contained, restrained, political, and ideological rivalry into a violent, at times murderous confrontation between Sunnis and Shiites throughout the region. One side in the conflict is Iran, accompanied by local allies in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and Yemen. The other side includes the Sunni Arab states and Turkey, alongside Salafist Islamic groups some of which – such as the rebel groups in Syria – are supported or even controlled by various Arab states while others are affiliated proxies of al-Qaeda, e.g., Jabhat a-Nusra (Jabhat Fateh a-Sham, in its new incarnation) and the Islamic State, which have emerged as particularly vicious toward Shiites in general as well as other minority groups, whether Islamic or not (such as Alawites, Druze, Yazidis, and various Christian groups).¹²

Iran's decision in the spring of 2013 to send Hezbollah into battle alongside Bashar Assad in Syria prompted the attempt by anti-regime rebel groups to exact their revenge of the Shiites in Lebanon with a series of terrorist attacks and missile fire against Shiite concentrations in Beirut and the Bekaa Valley, killing dozens and injuring hundreds. This in turn made Hezbollah deepen its involvement in the Syrian campaign even more, while

placing particular emphasis on the Syrian-Lebanese border areas, such as the Qalamoun Mountains and the northern Bekaa region.¹³ Hezbollah's growing involvement in Syria has resulted in the deaths of some one thousand of the organization's fighters. One factor behind the death toll is the radicalization of Salafist organizations operating in Syria, which view any Shiite as an enemy deserving death. Even though the killing of Hezbollah personnel has aroused dissatisfaction among Shiites in Lebanon, the radical nature and extreme cruelty of the Salafist organizations toward Shiites and their representatives in Syria have in practice left the Lebanese Shiites with no choice but to take cover behind Hezbollah.¹⁴

Syria and Lebanon: Between Washington and Moscow

An important player absent from the Middle East arena in the first decade of this century and now returning with much fanfare is Russia. Moscow has exploited the weakened status of the United States in the region, which began already during George W. Bush's term in office, given the deadlocked US involvement in Iraq and the failure of the US policy on Syria and Lebanon. The policy was meant to weaken Bashar Assad and perhaps even topple him, as well as strengthen the Lebanese anti-Hezbollah factions headed by Sa'ad a-Din al-Hariri, the country's Sunni leader. Barack Obama first tried to curry favor with the region's inhabitants and leaders with soft, conciliatory messages and promises of a clean slate in relations between the United States and the Arab world. But once this proved futile and the region was caught up in the Arab Spring, Obama gave up on his vision and sought to distance himself from the region and reduce US involvement to a minimum.

This US weakness allowed Russian President Vladimir Putin to return to the Middle East and fill the vacuum. The arena in which Putin chose to make his first move was Syria, and to attain this goal Putin was willing to cooperate, if only tactically, with Iran and with Hezbollah. In September 2015, Russia announced its military involvement in Syria. In practice, this cooperation included Russian protection and patronage of Iranian and Hezbollah activity in Syria, which from their perspectives provided them with clear advantages: regional and international legitimacy, and – on the immediate bilateral level – Russian arms supplies to Iran, and Russia looking the other way when these arms reached Hezbollah hands (conversely, Russia has turned a blind eye to Israel's activities countering Iranian and Syrian arms shipments to Hezbollah). The confluence of Iranian and Russian interests, in

which Hezbollah is a behind-the-scenes partner, has not succeeded in hiding the inherent tensions and basic disagreements between the two sides as to the future of Syria: will it be a state under Iranian influence or be beholden to Russia's hegemony?

From the External to the Internal Arena

Hezbollah's success in billing the Second Lebanon War a victory has not helped the organization very much at home: neither within the Shiite community, which was unhappy with the price it had to pay for the war, nor with the other players in the intra-Lebanese arena, which may have been impressed with Hezbollah's ability to survive Israel's blows, but were determined to stand steadfast against the challenge posed by the organization. In the Lebanese parliamentary elections in June 2009, the March 14 camp, led by the Sunni Hariri family, and its Druze and Christian partners managed to win a majority against the Shiite Hezbollah-Amal camp and their Maronite allies, led by General Michel Aoun.¹⁵ At the same time, the international investigation into the murder of Rafiq al-Hariri has resulted in an indictment against some senior Hezbollah personnel. While the organization has irately rejected the accusations against it and has refused to extradite the people involved, it has also avoided upsetting the balance in the Lebanese arena, because the Lebanese government, of which Hezbollah is a member, contributes to the financing of the international committee of inquiry into Hariri's murder and the International Court, which is trying, in absentia, the Hezbollah operatives involved.¹⁶

Hezbollah has been forced to continue fighting for hegemony in the intra-Lebanese arena while adopting some political flexibility and patience, even the willingness to act in consensus with coalition governments, as long as these serve the organization's goals. For example, Hezbollah has been a member of most of the governments in Lebanon formed since the Second Lebanon War, but when it felt threatened it reacted with force: in May 2008, after government decisions harmed its interests, Hezbollah seized control of west Beirut until achieving the Doha agreement that gave it a way out of the deadlock that had persisted among the power centers in Lebanon.¹⁷

In Syria, Assad failed to translate his successes on the international stage – his projected image as someone who defied Israel and the United States and managed to extricate himself, unharmed and without having made any ideological concessions, from the isolation imposed by George W. Bush –

into cementing support or guaranteeing his status in Syrian public opinion, especially in the Sunni sector in Syria's rural and peripheral regions. This sector, suffering from a profound economic crisis because of droughts and a government policy that sought to promote economic openness at its expense, was responsible for starting the wave of anti-Assad protests in March 2011, which later developed into the Syrian revolution and then the Syrian civil war that has raged in the country ever since.¹⁸

Conclusion

In the summer of 2006, Hassan Nasrallah predicted that the Second Lebanon War would become a historic landmark and the countdown to the end of the State of Israel. With the same breath, Nasrallah sought to make the war into a milestone on Hezbollah's road to hegemony in Lebanon. In practice, he failed. The Second Lebanon War did not break apart the camp of Hezbollah opponents in Lebanon, and it also turned the spotlight on the organization's Shiite identity, its connections to Iran, its dependence on Tehran, and its obeisance to Iranian dictates. Moreover, the Second Lebanon War may be seen as a preview, albeit indirect, of the revolution happening in Syria, a revolution aimed not only against Bashar Assad but also against his ally, Hezbollah.

Notes

- 1 See Hassan Nasrallah's speech on September 22, 2006, "Remarks by Said Nasrallah in Honor of the August 2006 Victory," *al-Alkat al-A'alamiya*, <http://www.mediarelations-lb.org/article.php?id=3684&cid=164#.Vr-GwU0UFDw>.
- 2 Eyal Zisser, "Israel and Syria after the Second Lebanon War (2006-2009): Between the Drums of War and the Bells of Peace," in *Security and Political Challenges in the Test of Reality: Israel Between the Arab World and the International Arena*, eds. Michael M. Lasker and Yitzhak Ronen (Ramat Gan: Bar-Ilan University Press, 2013), pp. 563-82; for Bashar Assad's speech to the Arab Journalists' Conference in Damascus shortly after the end of the Second Lebanon War, see SANA (Syrian National News Agency), August 15, 2006, <http://www.rtv.gov.sy/index.php?d=100349>.
- 3 Mamoun Effendi, "Is the Conflict still Arab-Israeli?" *al-Arabiya*, August 7, 2006; *al-Arabiya*, August 11, 2014, <http://goo.gl/M3ESuzl>.
- 4 For US embassy cables from Beirut during and after the Second Lebanon War as these appear on the WikiLeaks website, see <https://wikileaks.org/-Leaks-.html>.

- 5 "Jumblatt Expresses Concern about Hizbollah's Preparations for New War," *al-Arabiya*, January 25, 2008, <http://www.alarabiya.net/articles/2008/01/25/44694.html>.
- 6 See, e.g., statement made by former head of Israel's Military Intelligence Maj. Gen. Aviv Kokhavi in Shahar Hai, "Accurate and Deadly: 170,000 Missiles Threaten," *Ynet*, January 29, 2014, <http://www.ynet.co.il/articles/0,7340,L-4482538,00.html>.
- 7 Eyal Zisser, "It's a Long Road to Peace with Syria: From the Second Lebanon War to Peace Overtures in Ankara," *Strategic Assessment* 11, no. 2 (2008): 107-22, [http://www.inss.org.il/uploadimages/Import/\(FILE\)1226474819.pdf](http://www.inss.org.il/uploadimages/Import/(FILE)1226474819.pdf).
- 8 For general background on the topic, see Meir Elran and Shlomo Brom, eds., *The Second Lebanon War: Strategic Perspectives* (Tel Aviv: Institute for National Security Studies, 2007), [http://www.inss.org.il/uploadimages/Import/\(FILE\)1285063319.pdf](http://www.inss.org.il/uploadimages/Import/(FILE)1285063319.pdf).
- 9 "Thousands of Iranian Soldiers in Syria," *Israel Hayom*, October 15, 2015, <http://www.israelhayom.co.il/article/321097>.
- 10 Yoav Zeitun and Roi Kais, "Jihad Muhgnyieh Planned Attacks on the Golan Heights," *Ynet*, January 19, 2015, <http://www.ynet.co.il/articles/0,7340,L-4616461,00.html>; Roi Kais, "Hezbollah: Samir Kuntar, who Murdered the Haran Family, Eliminated in Israeli Attack in Damascus," *Ynet*, December 20, 2015, <http://www.ynet.co.il/articles/0,7340,L-4741487,00.html>.
- 11 Yoav Zeitun, "Incident in the North: Two Soldiers Killed on Northern Border," *Ynet*, January 29, 2015, <http://www.ynet.co.il/articles/0,7340,L-4620371,00.html>.
- 12 Eyal Zisser, "The Islamic State Kingdom in Syria," in *The Islamic State: How Viable Is It?* eds. Yoram Schweitzer and Omer Einav (Tel Aviv: Institute for National Security Studies), pp. 125-31.
- 13 Jacky Khoury, "At Least 43 Dead and Dozens Injured in Double Attack in Southern Beirut; ISIS Assumes Responsibility," *Haaretz*, November 12, 2015, <http://www.haaretz.co.il/news/world/middle-east/1.2775299>.
- 14 Robert Rabil, *Salafism in Lebanon: From Apoliticism to Transnational Jihadism* (Washington D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2014).
- 15 For a survey of the 2009 Lebanese parliamentary election, see National Democratic Institute, "Final Report on the 2009 Lebanese Parliamentary Elections," <https://www.ndi.org/node/16115>.
- 16 For the investigating committee's report and the proceedings of the International Court, see <http://www.stl-tsl.org/en>.
- 17 Robert F. Worth and Nada Bakrimay, "Deal for Lebanese Factions Leaves Hezbollah Stronger," *New York Times*, May 22, 2008, http://www.nytimes.com/2008/05/22/world/middleeast/22lebanon.html?_r=0.
- 18 Eyal Zisser, *Syria: Protest, Revolution, Civil War* (Tel Aviv: Moshe Dayan Center for Middle Eastern and African Studies, 2014).