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## **From Baabda to al-Qusayr: Hezbollah's Victory March**

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On October 31, 2016, following a prolonged crisis that paralyzed Lebanon's political system for two and a half years, General Michel Aoun was elected president. Aoun entered the presidential palace in Baabda after an agreement was reached that constituted a victory for Hezbollah and the March 8 Alliance over its opponents in the March 14 Alliance, led by Saad Hariri, head of the Future Movement. Two weeks later, on November 13, 2016, Hezbollah held a military demonstration at al-Qusayr in Syria, not far from the border with Lebanon. The timing and place were no accident. Al-Qusayr, located on the road halfway between Homs in Syria and Tripoli in Lebanon, is a symbol of the organization's military success in Syria following its important victory there in 2013 – a victory marking Hezbollah's publicly acknowledged intervention in the fighting on the side of the Assad regime and its position as a “defender of Lebanon” controlling an external envelope along the border with Syria. The demonstration was held on the organization's “Shahid Day,” one week before Lebanon's Independence Day. With the end of the political crisis and the events in Syria, Hezbollah's demonstration of power—intentionally or not—sent a dual message: to Lebanon, and to regional and international actors.

In the internal Lebanese sphere, Hezbollah has triumphed in its long political struggle. Since May 2014, there has been no president in Lebanon, after the Lebanese parliament failed to appoint a replacement for outgoing President Suleiman. Hezbollah has consistently supported the candidacy of Michel Aoun, leader of the Free Patriotic Movement and an important ally of the March 8 camp. The March 14 camp first supported the candidacy of Lebanese Forces Party leader Samir Geagea, then switched its support to Suleiman Frangieh, and finally bowed to pressure from Hezbollah, after realizing that time was working in favor of Hezbollah, which was consolidating its ruling status in Lebanon. The March 14 camp agreed to support Aoun in return for the appointment of Hariri to another term as Prime Minister. Hezbollah's persistence over such a long period while forcing its rivals' hand demonstrates its endurance and patience, which were ultimately rewarded by the results it sought from the outset. Hezbollah's achievement also constitutes an additional blow to Saudi Arabia in its struggle with Iran over influence in Lebanon. The strengthening of Iran's Shiite satellite in Lebanon reinforces Iran's grip on the region.

Throughout the crisis Hezbollah refrained from using military means, preferring a political solution that incurred no risk of escalation and a civil war. Becoming the “defender of Lebanon” and exercising control of the border between Lebanon and Syria in response to the activity of the Salafist jihad organizations has given Hezbollah unprecedented status, which it could have used to take over the government and law enforcement institutions. Hezbollah preferred, however, to wait for victory on the political field – a reflection of its caution in using its leverage within the country and desire to avoid a violent internal conflict. Having proven its political power, at al-Qusayr Hezbollah paraded its military power and supremacy over the Lebanese state security forces (Western weapons may have been selected for the demonstration of force precisely for that reason). The demonstration likewise supplied further justification for Hezbollah's involvement in Syria in the name of the defense of Lebanon against the war spreading to its territory. This justification is essential to Hezbollah, due to the severe criticism it received in Lebanon for its intervention in Syria. Hezbollah's Sunni and Christian rivals asserted that Hezbollah's involvement in the war in Syria would draw the war into their country and drag Lebanon into a bloodbath. Opinions are not even uniform within the Shite community. The heavy casualties damaged the support for Hezbollah and its policy (although the criticism was kept within the community, and solidarity was outwardly observed). In this context, a demonstration of strength such as the one in al-Qusayr is an important boost to the Shiite community.

The demonstration was also a precedent at the regional and international levels. This is the first time that Hezbollah highlighted its military power outside of Lebanon, other than on the battlefield. Such an event conducted by a non-state power on foreign soil is no routine matter. In addition to the symbolic significance of al-Qusayr, recent developments in Syria and in the international campaign are forcing Hezbollah to maintain its role and status in the war in Syria. The intense battles in Aleppo require massive input from the coalition supporting Assad, comprising Russia, Iran, and Hezbollah. The conquest of Aleppo by the pro-Syrian coalition will fortify Assad's status as the sole ruling option. The Syrian backbone from Aleppo to Damascus, in which al-Qusayr occupies a key position, is the most stable ground for Assad, and supremacy there, achieved to a great extent with the help of Hezbollah, is maintained. In the background, US President-elect Donald Trump is hinting that he wants to hand the “Syrian file” to Russia, so it is possible that Hezbollah's demonstration of force is also aimed at Russia, with an eye to the day after Assad regains control of Syria.

The use of American equipment in the Hezbollah demonstration has figured in most of the responses in Lebanese discourse. The sight of Hezbollah soldiers on M-113 armored personnel carriers (APCs) has led this debate to the obvious conclusion that the arms that the United States supplies to the Lebanese army are sent on to Hezbollah. This is no surprise to any of the parties, but it is sometimes necessary “to see in order to believe.” Hezbollah's military dominance, not just outwardly, but also in preserving order in Lebanon, has weakened the status of the state

security forces and blurred the boundaries between the state forces and the Shiite organization to the extent that some believe that Hezbollah controls the Lebanese army. This challenges the position in the United States and European countries such as France and Italy that the Lebanese army should be strengthened in order to change the internal Lebanese balance of power and weaken Hezbollah's influence. Realization of this situation – that supporting the Lebanese army and government means strengthening Hezbollah – led Saudi Arabia to suspend its aid to Lebanon in early 2016. The Lebanese army, which understood what this meant and was eager to preserve American support, sought to reassure the United States by claiming that it was not the source of the weapons featured at al-Qusayr. According to another report, the APCs displayed proudly by Hezbollah were captured from the South Lebanese Army supported by Israel before its demise in 2000. The lack of clarity about how the aid given to Lebanon was used and the concern that this aid finds its way to Hezbollah could confront the West, especially the new US administration, with a substantial dilemma concerning continued aid to the Lebanese military.

In conclusion, Hezbollah currently has the advantage over its enemies in Lebanon. Its power and rule – direct and indirect – over events in the country are undisputed. At the present time, there is no political or military power able to challenge Hezbollah in Lebanon. Its power, however, can also be its weak point. Realization by the new United States administration that aid to Lebanon in effect constitutes aid to Hezbollah – even if the understanding has yet to sink in – could lead to reconsideration of economic and military aid to Lebanon, despite the end of the political crisis in the country. This is likely to have a negative impact on the country's economy and the stability of its institutions, thereby arousing widespread unrest against Hezbollah and strengthening the opposition to it – with an emphasis on the radical Sunni element. This is currently a remote possibility, but developments in this direction are also liable to bring about a conflict between Hezbollah and Israel, should Hezbollah decide that such a conflict will be useful in the Lebanese theater. At the present time, Hezbollah is acting very cautiously and is unwilling to risk escalation with Israel or the destabilization of Lebanon. From Hezbollah's perspective, its leading interest now is fortifying the Assad regime in Syria and strengthening the Iranian axis stretching from Tehran to Baghdad, Damascus, and Beirut.

