



PERSPECTIVES

THE BEGIN-SADAT CENTER FOR STRATEGIC STUDIES

Implications of the Emergent Russian-Hezbollah Coordination in Syria

by Yossi Mansharof

BESA Center Perspectives Paper No. 383, December 2, 2016

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: Recently, Hezbollah-affiliated Lebanese media reported on a first meeting in Aleppo between Russian senior military officials and Hezbollah field commanders, whereby the two sides agreed to continue conferring on a regular basis. The timing of this meeting, prior to the inauguration of US President-elect Donald Trump, appears to have been a calculated move, and it bears important implications for the US and Israel.

On November 24, 2016, the Hezbollah-affiliated Lebanese daily *al-Akhbar* reported that for the first time Russian senior military officers held a direct meeting with Hezbollah field commanders. The meeting had taken place in Aleppo a week earlier.

According to the report, the meeting was conducted via representatives in joint operations rooms in Baghdad and Damascus, and it included Syrian and Iraqi military officers. The meeting was held at the request of the Russians and concluded with Moscow and Hezbollah agreeing to convene such meetings regularly.

The report states that Russia initiated the meeting after being impressed by Hezbollah's efforts at repelling the Syrian rebel attack in western Aleppo in October. *Al-Akhbar* added that the open channel between the parties will include operational discussions of military programs, and will not address the conflict between Hezbollah and Israel.

If Russia really does intend to step up its military cooperation with Hezbollah in Syria by maintaining this channel, Israel must update the security coordination between Prime Minister Netanyahu and President Putin.

The Syrian civil war has long been transformed from a local and regional feud into a superpower conflict on a par with other flashpoints between the superpowers in Eastern Europe, the Middle East and Asia. Moscow has been consistently prepared to defend its vital interests in the Syrian arena, while the Obama administration's Syrian policy has been timid and indecisive.

The US administration has persistently proclaimed that Assad must go. Ultimately, however, it relented and agreed to consider the Syrian dictator a legitimate actor in a transitional government that is supposed to lead the country toward a new future. Russia, aware of US confusion, began in July 2015 to increase its footprint in Syria through direct, escalating military intervention and widespread attacks against the Syrian opposition.

The Russia-Hezbollah meeting has important implications for the Islamist group, the US, and Israel.

Hezbollah is mired in the Syrian quagmire. According to estimates by Hezbollah's opponents in Lebanon's Shiite community, the group's death toll in Syria has passed the threshold of two thousand fatalities. Hezbollah needs a response to its critics among both Lebanese Shiites and the wider Sunni world, which accuse it of participating in genocide and in directing its weapons against Muslims instead of Israel.

The leak of the Hezbollah-Russia meeting by a Lebanese media outlet affiliated with the Shiite group is unlikely, therefore, to have been coincidental. Hezbollah's mounting casualties have contributed to a decline in motivation among Lebanon's Shiite youth to enlist in its ranks, and its Syrian involvement has inflicted a blow to its public standing – particularly among its traditional supporters, who have served as an important base for its political and security activity.

A direct military and operational dialogue with Russia will serve Hezbollah in three ways. First, it can bolster its image and present it as the recipient of growing recognition and support as a legitimate operational actor in the Syrian arena. Secondly, it signals to critics at home that the number of fatalities from the fighting in Syria could be reduced now that a direct channel with Russia has been established. Thirdly, Hezbollah can reap military benefits in the form of improved warfare capabilities in built-up areas.

Those benefits will serve Hezbollah well in its fight against Israel, from both defensive and offensive standpoints. In terms of defense, Hezbollah's exposure to Russian military operations could significantly improve its overall level of readiness and competence in dealing with infiltration by Israeli special forces. In terms of offense, by learning from the Russian army, Hezbollah can improve and streamline its military doctrine and combat skills, which would hamper the IDF's ability to counter it.

Precisely for this reason, the direct military channel in Aleppo between Russia and Hezbollah harms Israel's interests in Lebanon.

In the public debate in Israel on the implications of Hezbollah's participation in the Syrian civil war, the main argument in favor is that the organization's wearing down of its manpower and its sinking into the Syrian quagmire plays into Israel's hands. But others have warned that by fighting in Syria, Hezbollah is improving its fighting capabilities in built-up areas. Those capabilities can potentially be used by Hezbollah to repel IDF forces from Lebanese villages, or to send "intervention forces" into Israel to capture populated areas and preoccupy Israel with fighting on its own turf.

In addition, though the report specified that the operational dialogue between Russia and Hezbollah will not address the organization's struggle against Israel, an alarm should be sounded in Jerusalem. The security coordination reached by Prime Minister Netanyahu and President Putin to avert an Israeli-Russian clash has been weakened following the entry of S300 missiles from Russia into Syria in October, as well as the indirect and unofficial defense umbrella provided by Moscow to Hezbollah in Syria. This umbrella likely explains the fact that in the past year there have been fewer reports of Israeli attacks on Hezbollah in Syria.

Enhanced security coordination between Russia and Hezbollah might also be intended as a signal to the incoming US administration. Russia might wish to convey to Trump, whose future policy in the Syrian arena is anyone's guess, that it is prepared to thwart American steps in Syria that are not to its liking – first and foremost any attempt to depose Assad. Russia's strengthening of air defenses and tightening of relations with Hezbollah in Syria might aim at forestalling any attempt by Trump to establish a restricted flight zone in Syria, as proposed during his election campaign.

Another recent report in the Lebanese media indicated that Hezbollah is planning to beef up its manpower and weaponry ahead of an expansive ground attack on Aleppo. It is possible that the Russia-Iran-Hezbollah axis, aided by Iraqi, Afghan and Pakistani Shiite militias, seeks to establish facts on the ground that will scupper any plans of the new US administration to establish an offensive policy in Syria. A direct

operations channel between Russia and Hezbollah may facilitate the attainment of this strategic goal.

Yossi Mansharof is a PhD candidate in the Department of Middle Eastern History at Haifa University, and a researcher at the Ezri Center for Iran and Persian Gulf Studies.

BESA Center Perspectives Papers are published through the generosity of the Greg Rosshandler Family