

HEZBOLLAH'S CAMPAIGN IN ARSAL: CONTESTED SUCCESS FOR LEBANON

Murat TINAS

Dr. Murat Tinas works as a Research Assistant at the Department of International Relations, Gazi University. He received his Ph.D. at the Middle East Technical University. He studied Arabic in Jordan during his graduate studies and worked as an affiliate researcher at the Center for Arab and Middle Eastern Studies, American University of Beirut. His academic interests include Lebanese politics, foreign policy analysis, the role of sectarian identity in foreign policy, and the Middle East politics.

The continuous civil war in Syria exacerbated long-lasting cleavages in Lebanon and therefore the country faces numerous internal and external challenges. Although Arsal has just re-become headlines in the newspapers for couple of weeks, this is not the first time that Syrian armed groups face off with the Lebanese Army and Hezbollah in Arsal, the northeastern border town. The recent military campaign of Hezbollah remind us again the strategic importance of Arsal despite its isolation and backwardness and re-opened the tense discussions among the Lebanese confessional groups. With only a weak army and a fragile balance of power built upon many confessional groups, Hezbollah's attack put the Lebanese government in an untenable position. It is also an obvious fact that despite all the military aid it receives, the Lebanese Army was inert to the situation in Arsal, which has also been a challenge for its sovereignty. Irrespective of the dilemmas of the situation, however, Hezbollah's campaign without the real supervision of the government demonstrates the complete surrender of the state to Hezbollah's agenda which is within the sphere of Iranian influence.

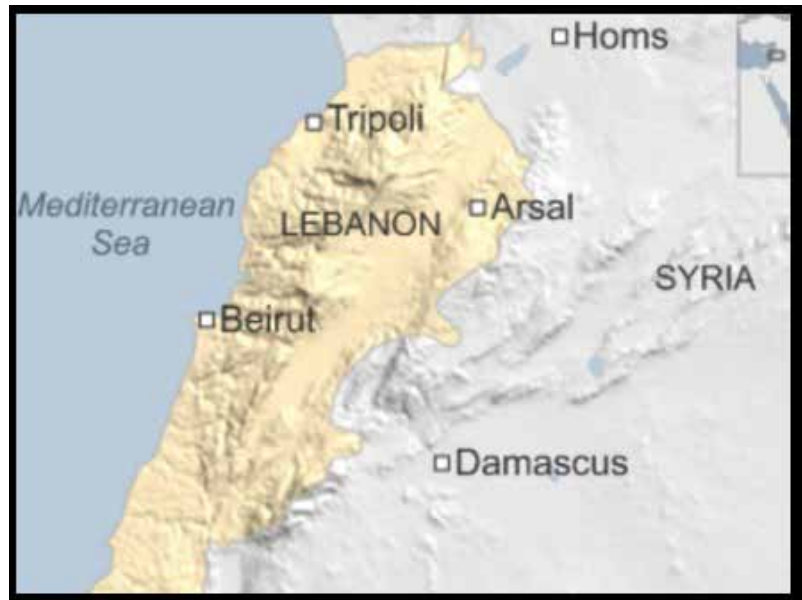
The continuous civil war in Syria exacerbated long-lasting historical and social cleavages in the Lebanese society and therefore the country faces numerous internal and external challenges. Although Aarsal has justre-become headlines in the newspapers for couple of weeks, this is not the first time that armed groups in Syria face off with the Lebanese Army and Hezbollah in Aarsal, the northeastern border town. Indeed, the first clashes broke out in Aarsal in the mid-2014. The recent military campaign of Hezbollah with the support

of the Syrian Air Force and the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) remind us again the strategic importance of Aarsal despite its isolation and backwardness and re-opened the tense discussions among the Lebanese confessional groups.

Aarsal and Its Strategic Importance in the Syrian Civil War

Aarsal is an isolated and under-developed town lying along the Lebanese-Syrian border. In terms of its population, it is mostly populated by Lebanese Sunnis. With this characteristic,

Lebanon Map



as FidaaItani states, it is a kind of sectarian exception within broader Shia area. Due to its geographic disadvantages, the economic activity in the town has historically been quite limited and, according to some reports by Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, only around 10% of the population has a regular employment in the town. The economic deprivation leads to the rise of the illegal smuggling as it does in any underdeveloped border city. Therefore, even before the uprising in Syria, there was well-established smuggling networks between the people of Aarsal and those living along the Lebanese-Syrian border.

Since the beginning of the uprising in Syria, and especially after the transformation of the conflict into a civil war, it is widely reported that Aarsal has become one of the most significant corridor for both humanitarian aid and weapons going to the opposition groups in Syria. When the military balance in Syria has changed with the advancement of Syrian regime with the help of its

both regional and international allies, Syrian armed opposition groups suffer a series of failures in Homs and its southern countryside towards the end of 2013. In such a conjuncture, Syrian opposition groups retreated to Aarsal in the Lebanese territory. Indeed, there are several reasons for this decision. The first one is its demographic composition. Since Aarsal is mostly populated by Sunnis, Sunni opposition could benefit from this town as a harbor of refuge. Secondly, the geographic proximity allowed oppositionists to continue their struggle against the regime. Thirdly, Aarsal has already become a refuge point for the relatives of oppositionists. Therefore, in the absence of an official data, it is estimated that there were around 70.000 Syrians in Aarsal in the beginning of 2014, which counts for more than three times of its population.

When Syrian armed opposition retreated to Aarsal towards the end of 2013, Aarsal became a very controversial issue in Lebanese domestic

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politics. Indeed, political divisions along sectarian lines in Lebanon have always made it difficult for the country to have an overall approach in Syrian crisis. However, due to its strategic importance in the Syrian civil war, the issue became highly tense because Lebanese politics has already been deeply divided between those backing the Damascus regime and those supporting the opposition. Therefore, in August 2014, there was clashes between the LAF and certain Syrian opposition factions, which resulted in Lebanon's years-long hostage crisis. Finally, armed clashes have ceased without a clear resolution and some Syrian armed groups started to hold the border area of Aarsal and the LAF provided a kind of

defense zone along the western flank of the area against their further infiltration into the Lebanese territory.

To conclude, Aarsal was the most serious spillovers of the Syrian civil war in Lebanon since 2014 and it is estimated that Juroud Aarsal area had been a refuge for around 3.000 militants, two thirds of them are ISIS or al-Nusra members and the remainders are other rebel groups. Additionally, the area is home for thousands of Syrian refugees.

Hezbollah's Offensive in Aarsal

Speaking in the parliament on 18 July 2017, Lebanese Prime Minister Saad Al-Hariri said

Hezbollah's Campaign in Aarsal (Source: The Daily Star)



that the army would launch an operation in the Juroud Aarsal. Then, on 20 July, Hezbollah declared that it would start an operation to clear al-Qaeda linked Jabhat al-Nusra, recently known as Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, from the Juroud Aarsal mountainous border area as well as the areas of the western Qalamoun in Syria. At the beginning of the operation, the Syrian Air Force conducted airstrikes and the LAF, which has a strong line of towers along the western flank of the area, had continued to conduct regular artillery strikes. At this phase, Hezbollah also worked to limit the further infiltration of armed groups into Lebanon and to prevent them from escaping.

The simultaneous operations of the Syrian Air Force on its territory and the artillery support of the LAF on the Lebanese side demonstrated the high level of coordination between these two forces. Although al-Hariri argued the opposite by saying that “there is no coordination between the

Lebanese and Syrian armies,” it is not an unknown secret. Even Minister of Culture Ghattas Khoury from the Future Movement revealed this cooperation by stating that security coordination has long existed between the two countries.

The offensive began in 21 July and Hezbollah seized most of the ground in just a few days. The operation in eastern Lebanon mainly aimed at clearing the area from the combined force of the al-Qaeda linked al-Nusra and a small contingent of the Free Syrian Army. Although the LAF continued its regular strikes and tried to prevent any of militants from coming into their area during the operation, it did not take direct part. As of late July, Hezbollah-affiliated press started to report that Hezbollah fighters had taken control of key positions on the outskirts of Aarsal. After certain advancement in seven days, on 27 July, Hezbollah announced that it reached an agreement with al-Nusra fighters to provide a safe passage into rebel-held areas in Syria for them and civilians

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Hezbollah Troops in Juroud Arsal (Source: Al-Jadeed)

including refugees. Under the deal agreed between Hezbollah and Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, thousands of armed militants and their families were shuttled to Idlib Province and some other towns in the first week of August 2017. At the end, Syrian rebel groups and terrorist factions in Arsal have been pushed out successfully and Hezbollah stuck its yellow flag next to the Lebanese flag in the area in order to show its clout. Therefore, it is important to note that this campaign was directed and carried out by Hezbollah, not by the LAF.

The Aftermath of the Operation

Although the operation was comparatively short, there is still a huge controversy about Hezbollah's fight against Hayat Tahrir al-Sham in Arsal. Those who criticized the organization mainly argues that eradication of terrorists is an exclusive national duty for the army, not an armed group in the country. Prime Minister al-Hariri, for instance, said that he disagreed with Hezbollah's activity and would have preferred to see the Lebanese army operating in its place. Ali al-Husseini, a columnist for al-Mustaqbal the

journal close to Hariri's movement, stated in his article on Aarsal operation that the organization was serving Iran and the Syrian regime.

Upon the completion of the operation, Hezbollah needs to hand over the area formerly held by Jabhat al-Nusra to the LAF and it is highly possible that Hezbollah would withdraw from the area and was replaced by LAF forces. This is also the expectation of the government. That is why Prime Minister al-Hariri told in one interview that "the army is going to take over the whole thing, and Hezbollah is going to withdraw."

Nicholas Blanford states that with the possible deployment of regiments of the LAF, the Lebanese state will have a full presence along the entire the Syrian-Lebanese border for the first time since its independence, on paper at least, except the area controlled by ISIS.

Hezbollah is expected to leave the area not because that the Lebanese government has complete control of its territory or the LAF can take significant action on Hezbollah or eliminate its safe heavens but mainly because of three reasons. First, by handing over the Juroud Aarsal, Hezbollah can free up many

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Juroud Aarsal after the Operation



of its fighters for the combat in Syria, where they have been playing a very significant role in keeping Bashar al-Assad in power. Second, the deployment of the LAF in Juroud Arsal may ease some of its criticisms because not everyone in Lebanon is happy with Hezbollah's operational capabilities. Moreover, it is also important to note that handing over the territory gained in Arsal to the army does not necessarily mean the loss of Hezbollah's influence in the area.

Without doubt, Hezbollah again acted as a quasi-state actor by launching a military operation in Arsal unilaterally as it started a war in 2006. These actions are certainly direct challenge to the Lebanese sovereignty and put the Lebanese government in an untenable position with only a weak army and a fragile balance of

power built upon many confessional groups. It is therefore that al-Hariri as the prime minister of Lebanon could only express his feelings about the victory by stating that "Hezbollah carried out the operation and it achieved something and what is important is the result." One also needs to state that for all the military aid it receives from U.S. and U.K., the LAF was inert to the situation in Arsal for about three years, which has also been a challenge for its sovereignty. Irrespective of the dilemmas of the situation, however, as Ali al-Amin from *The Arab Weekly* argues that Hezbollah's campaign without the real supervision of the government and the army demonstrates the complete surrender of the state to Hezbollah's agenda which is within the sphere of Iranian influence, whose dominance in Lebanon is on the rise.

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Ortadoğu Stratejik Araştırmalar Merkezi (ORSAM)

Süleyman Nazif Sokak No: 12-B Çankaya / Ankara

Tel: 0 (312) 430 26 09 Fax: 0 (312) 430 39 48

www.orsam.org.tr