

BICOM Briefing | Hezbollah and Iranian forces in Aleppo and the Syrian Civil War

22nd December 2016

Yoram Schweitzer is an expert on international terrorism and head of the Institute for National Security Studies (INSS) Programme on Terrorism and Low Intensity Conflict. He has briefed BICOM on Hezbollah's involvement in the ongoing Syrian conflict together with Iranian forces, in particular in Aleppo, and the possible consequences for the Middle East.

Schweitzer has been a researcher at the INSS since February 2003, following a distinguished career in the Israeli intelligence community as well as in the academic world. Among other positions, he served as a consultant on counter-terror strategies to the Prime Minister's Office and the Ministry of Defence, Head of the Counter International Terror Section in the IDF, and a member in a Task Force dealing with Israeli MIAs at the Prime Minister's Office. Schweitzer was a researcher and head of Educational Curriculum at the International Policy Institute for Counter Terrorism (ICT) at the Inter Disciplinary Center (IDC) in Herzliya. His areas of expertise include al-Qaeda and its affiliates – also known as the “Afghan alumni phenomenon,” suicide terrorism, and state-sponsored terrorism. Below is an edited transcript.

While operating in Syria, Hezbollah has proven himself to be mostly a proxy of Iran. It's quite obvious that Hezbollah has cemented its pivotal role in the unique strategic relationship that prevails between the partners in the axis of Iran, Syria and Hezbollah that now has the backing of the Russians. Hezbollah has basically taken control of Lebanon's foreign and security policy of Lebanon and subjected it to foreign interest in order to save Assad. When [Hassan] Nasrallah started being involved in the Syrian dispute he explained its logic in the pretext of defending the Shi'ite population in Syria and defending the Lebanese interests vis-a-vis the Sunni extreme Islamist activity towards Lebanon.

Hezbollah, by its deep involvement in the Syrian civil war has shifted its appeal from a force of “resistance” into an occupying force, which it totally aligned itself with the Assad regime, as it shared the brutality of this regime against the local population. To date it's quite clear that Hezbollah is a very focal player in the Syrian arena along with Iran. Iran, of course, is running the show, but Hezbollah is totally committed and

subjected to the Iranian policy. Hezbollah has been invested in Lebanon with a large number of fighters. Albeit I am sceptical about the accuracy of numbers of terrorists being issued glibly by the media – the number I would carefully adopt of Hezbollah’s manpower in the conflict Syria would be between 8,000 and 10,000 members. Some of them belong to Hezbollah’s elite forces of “Katibat Radwan”. Hezbollah is doing the hard work for the Iranians in Syria and is responsible for establishing new organizations in Syria composed of local volunteers and foreign fighters from Afghanistan, Pakistan and from Iraq. All of these foreign volunteers are serving Assad’s regime. Hezbollah is training them, qualifying them as warriors, guiding them, equipping them and leading them to the fighting. The estimate of these forces again with the necessary caution would be around 50,000 fighters which include perhaps an additional 10,000, maybe less, of Hezbollah people and around the same number, maybe a little smaller, of Iranian Revolutionary Guards and other Iranian volunteers. All in all, these Shi’ite elements are running the fighting alongside with Assad forces.

I think Hezbollah’s involvement in Aleppo is no different than the role that it has played in other parts of the fighting. It’s crucial because not only is Hezbollah the most professional partner in this coalition of warriors, but its influence goes beyond its numbers and gives the confidence and professionalism to the Assad regime forces, fighting forces, which suffer from low morale and are exhausted. In spite of the fact that now they seem to be on the verge of some victorious manoeuvres. Of course the Russians, with the familiar brutality of the air force and the bombardment alongside the barrel bombings of the Assad regime’s air force, are the ones who changed, at least for now, the fate this conflict.

Hezbollah, that used to brag about its defensive role against Israel has practically abandoned it or put it aside at least temporarily. It is mainly focused in Syria and is immersed in this war. Hezbollah knows that the results of this war will have concrete repercussions towards its future in Lebanon and its connections to the regime of Assad – which is basically one of two states which managed and assisted Hezbollah for quite a long time allocating it with its arsenal of weaponry and other ways of support.

Question: *You’ve talked about the debated nature of the Assad forces, but just seeing the ordnance discharged in Aleppo and on other battlefields how do you rate the issue of resupply of equipment and particularly ammunition resupply? Is it coming*

from one primary source? The regime has been at war for five years, is it Russia and Iran that have taken charge of that?

YS: *Yes I think so. I think that Iran and Russia both are responsible for replenishing Assad's regime, the depots and the Assad regime arsenal – without it they would have collapsed for sure, quite a long time ago. These are the two sources. Hezbollah can serve as the one who leads it and basically integrates it into the forces, but these are the two main sources.*

Question: *Two questions. You mentioned, for example the role of the special forces from Hezbollah and so on. Could you give us an overall assessment of the fighting capacity of the Hezbollah units that have been involved in Syria, and the implications of that? And secondly, given Hezbollah's role, is it gaining a dividend in terms of increased arms supplies to itself? Does this explain some of the recent Israeli strikes and so on?*

YS: *As I already commented in the opening remarks, Hezbollah, has probably allocated to the campaign in Syria during the years that passed from the beginning of its involvement about 8,000 to 10,000 men, which are composed of special forces in the Radwan named after Imad Mughniyah's nickname. These are the special forces, the very best infantry of Hezbollah, plus other forces. Some of the forces have of course are new recruits that were trained and sent to the campaign.*

Hezbollah has many skills and a learning capacity, and definitely this experience in Syria has qualified Hezbollah to become a better fighting force. Hezbollah is no more merely an organisation, it is an army. It is an army that uses all kinds of tactics. In the past, it used to employ guerrilla tactics and terrorist tactics, but now it's fighting as an armed forces with a very clear cut structure and vision of an army. I think that Hezbollah for quite a long time – and it's not a new phenomenon – has the arsenal of army which has been supplied by the Syrian army and of course by Iran. Now the Syrian depots of arms are open for Hezbollah and whenever Hezbollah is in demand, the Assad regime will probably supply Hezbollah any kind of weapon it requires. Israel is quite aware of Hezbollah's efforts to transfer special kinds of sophisticated equipment and arms and is determined to pre-empt it.

Question: *Can I ask you Mr Schweitzer about Iran, and basically how you see the Iranian approach taking place? I ask this because I was in Iran covering the last election and speaking to young people there, they were surprisingly open young men about how they didn't want to go and fight and possibly die in Syria. Now since*

President Rouhani depends so much on the young support, on the young vote which he got in the last election, can he afford to keep sending young people to die in Syria or is it the case the case that most of the people doing the dying are the Afghans and the Pakistanis and the Iraqis.

YS: *First, I would say that with all due respect to Rouhani, I don't think he controls the shipment of the volunteers and the regular soldiers of the Iranian revolutionary guard to Syria. I think he doesn't interfere in an influential way on the way this war in Syria is being conducted by Iran. It is the Revolutionary Guard's almost free policy, with the backing of Khamenei , that determines Iran's Policy in Syria. So it has nothing to do with the pragmatic policy Rouhani is trying to promote and its openness to the West or internal policy towards youngster generation in Iran. I think that the internal struggle within Iran has nothing to do with the external military policy of the Iranians in the Middle East in general and in Syria in particular. I think that Iran looks at Syria as a strategic asset and it is fully invested in maintaining the regime of Assad almost at any cost. Of course the assistance of the Russians with their own interests in the Syrian conflict helped the Iranians to achieve their strategic goal – at least that's how it seems now. But the future is still vague and open and I'm not sure that the whole campaign in Syria was decisively won by the Assad regime and by its sponsors from Iran.*

Question: *I was in Lebanon earlier this year, and I thought it was interesting how in Beirut there was a kind of drop off in support for Hezbollah because so many young Lebanese where coming back in body bags. So I wonder whether the war in Syria could be a bad thing for Hezbollah in Lebanon because they are losing many men, and whether that's indirectly actually better for Israel.*

YS: *Leaving Israel aside I think there is no question there are negatives and positives for Hezbollah from its own point of view and even from an external perspective. The negative news for Hezbollah is that Hezbollah is losing more and more men. Again I don't like numbers because they are quite vague but they are talking about more than 1,200 fatalities at least and definitely many, many, or few thousands of wounded people, and this has an effect on the Shi'ite population – definitely on the Shi'ite population that is not supporting Hezbollah. It definitely worries many parties in Lebanon that are not interested in supporting the Assad regime with its brutal behaviour and the results that are quite obvious from this civil war. But Hezbollah, as I started mentioning in my opening remarks has hijacked the external security, and of the foreign policy of the Lebanese. I don't think anybody knows what the number of*

fatalities should be that will tilt the equation against Lebanon or rather Hezbollah's involvement the war. Actually no one can anticipate which rate of casualties can create internal problems for Nasrallah within its own Shi'ite constituency. Currently the number of casualties and the wounded people from Hezbollah is not enough to create a rebellion against Nasrallah, Nasrallah's policy within the Shi'ite community or within Lebanon.

As for Israel – again there's good news and bad news. Israel, as I said before, is looking very soberly at what is going on in Syria. It looks at Hezbollah's expenses, resources invested, amount of casualties and the fact that Hezbollah is immersed in the quagmire of Syria which prevents it from bothering it from Lebanon. This can be described as a quote, unquote, positive side. On the negative side, Hezbollah is gaining more and more experience, it is being trained, being equipped, it has partnerships not only with Iran and Syria, which of course will guarantee their full support without any limitations, and of course its cooperation with Russia. So this is the good news for Hezbollah, and Israel is looking at this in less favourable perspective.

Question: *What is your take on the interaction between the Iranians and the Russians on the ground? We heard reports, right or wrong, that there were some disagreement between them when it came down to the evacuation of civilians from eastern Aleppo. We hear that one load of civilians, one convoy of lorries went through a Russian checkpoint and was then stopped and turned back by the Iranians. On a wider scale I just wondered, I'm repeating myself, how they are getting or not getting on do you think, on the ground.*

YS: *I think it's quite obvious that Iran and Russia, although they are cooperating together, have different perspectives and different interests in their fighting in Syria. Russia has much larger and different considerations and interests because it is playing a role of a superpower. And the Russians are cooperating with the Americans so they have to be attentive to the American interests and pressures. Iran in its part is less concerned about these considerations. The Iranians want a decisive and full victory for Assad, and the remaining of Assad in power as its weakened proxy, so that it can control the whole scene in Syria. Assad is playing a marginal role in this game. Russia is more interested in having a subjected partner in the area. I estimate that as time progresses these differences between Iran and Russia will emerge. These different views and interests have already been apparent from time to time. So when the Russians have to comply with the US or to maintain some kind of ceasefire with*

the rebels because of their relationship with the Americans, Iran is much less tuned to these considerations. But I think as long as the Russians and the Iranians share a common interest of defeating the Syrian opposition and guaranteeing the control of Assad regime in Syria, then these differences will not create a significant rift between themselves.

Question: *Now that this sort of Russian, Iranian and the Assad regime and Hezbollah working together, have taken eastern Aleppo, where do you see them going next? Strategically what would be their next target?*

YS: *This is the \$64,000 question. Nobody knows where they are going. First of all, I don't have the answer. I hope that they know. But I think there are questions whether there are going to try and seize Idlib or to the Golan area. It depends. I don't know what their decision will be. This is something that we should look at in the near future and see how it works. I wouldn't be that sure that the campaign against the opposition and against the Jihadi-Salafists has ended. I don't think defeating them will go that smoothly. We have seen Assad on the losing side, now it seems he is on the winning side. This is the Middle East, and this is the Syrian campaign. I think we should look very prudently to see what the results of the entire campaign will be.*

Question: *I'm very intrigued by your last answer because I think your point that even with this force of 50,000 – there is a limitation in capacity at ground manoeuvre. And it seems to me that was the story we were getting out of Palmyra. How capable are they of manoeuvring much out of this chunk, this slice, which I suppose will we have to Alawistan, of the five cities, the axis between Damascus and Aleppo. Are they capable of ground operational manoeuvre beyond that much?*

YS: *Who are you talking about? The Iranians, Hezbollah with Assad? Are you talking about that?*

Question: *Sorry, I'm getting at the ground manoeuvre capacity of the Assad alliance forces as a whole, as a coalition.*

YS: *That's what I thought, yes. Again it depends in the interests of the Iranians and the Russians because they are currently the most significant players in this game. If they decide to go further from "vital Syria", first of all they will run into much bloodier battles. And second it depends on whether they are going to enlarge their initial aims. Some estimated that Assad would have liked to use this coalition to continue liberating all of Syria. To implement his grand ambitions he needs Russia. I don't know what the Russian's wishes are in this respect – whether they are going to*

support him also for the this part, whether the Russians will fight the rebels in the Eastern part of Syria or leave it to the Western coalition with the Kurds and others. So it depends. We still don't know what the decisions are in Moscow, and whether they correspond with Assad's wishes. We don't know if they are going to have the capability to "clean up" this area too. It's definitely going to be very bloody battles because Assad, if he manages to maintain his control of vital Syria, will still have opposition, fighting opposition against his rule, and no one can guess whether and how he can survive and more so, how he can gain control of the entire Syria in future.