

Outcry but nothing more after Hezbollah-ISIS deal

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Hezbollah's leaders were taken aback by the controversy over the evacuation of hundreds of Islamic State (ISIS) members and their families from Lebanon to the Syrian city of Abu Kamal on the Euphrates River.

The operation was in motion by August 29 but stalled, running into serious setbacks along the way. Billing the operation as "the second liberation," Hezbollah's leaders drew parallels between their present achievement and the liberation in May 2000 of southern Lebanon from Israeli occupation. Instead, they received an extremely angry backlash within their own constituency and from regional allies in Syria and Iraq.

The Lebanese were very unhappy with the deal because it allowed ISIS fighters to freely leave Lebanon with no trial or accountability. Lebanese Shias, who form the backbone of Hezbollah, were visibly upset, having suffered from ISIS car bombs and terrorist attacks that spread havoc within the Shia community. At a bare minimum, they wanted revenge against ISIS by finishing off its last remaining pockets in Lebanon.

The backlash became exceptionally bitter when it was revealed that nine Lebanese soldiers abducted by ISIS in 2014 were dead, returning home in wooden caskets.

Adding insult to injury, Hezbollah announced that it had traded the approximately 600 ISIS fighters and their families for the remains of one Iranian officer named Mohsen Hojaji, who had been taken hostage by ISIS and executed last August. Senior Lebanese officers were said to be complaining in private that the deal was a grave insult to the Lebanese Army, which should have been allowed to terminate the ISIS fighters, claiming they were prevented from doing so by Hezbollah.

In Syria, criticism was exceptionally high, although never on an official level, with activists in the pro-regime camp asking why the terrorists were being allowed safely into Syria on air-conditioned buses, as if the war-torn country didn't already have its abundant share of jihadis.



Free passage. Syrian forces stand on a tank next to vehicles waiting to transport ISIS members in the Qara area in Syria's Qalamoun region, on August 28.

(AFP)

Residents of Abu Kamal, who have been suffering from ISIS occupation since 2014, were furious that their city was becoming a dump site for regional terrorists, just like Idlib in north-western Syria.

The US-led forces in the region pledged to never allow ISIS out of Lebanon alive and inching towards victory in the jihadist group's self-declared capital of Raqqa, shredded the main highway to Abu Kamal, stranding the 17 buses in the Syrian Desert.

Hezbollah objected and so did the Iranian Foreign Ministry, claiming there were civilians, including elderly men, pregnant women and children, on board. If the United States struck the convoy, they warned, "a terrible massacre" would occur. Members of the Syrian opposition snapped back, accusing Hezbollah of hypocrisy for showing compassion for the families of ISIS members.

In Iraq, Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi – an ally of Hezbollah – was no less critical, saying: "Honestly speaking, we are unhappy and consider it incorrect."

Transferring the terrorists to the Iraqi border was "an insult to



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the Iraqi people" he added, which could seriously undermine his own army's efforts in eradicating ISIS from Iraqi towns and cities. A handful of jihadis reportedly slipped away from the stranded buses and found their way to Iraqi cities north of the Euphrates. They shaved their beards and melted into the tribal society, creating jihadi cells that could strike again.

Hezbollah Secretary-General Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah came out with an unapologetic speech, firmly defending his decision to transfer the terrorists from Lebanon to Syria. He said he had personally visited Damascus to discuss details of the transfer with Syrian President Bashar Assad.

Hezbollah apparently believes that the storm will soon pass once the Lebanese find something new to argue about.

The reasons behind pushing for such a controversial deal are numerous, but Hezbollah's main motivation is to go down in history for making Lebanon an ISIS-free country, regardless of what short-term effects this agreement would trigger within Lebanese society.

Secondly, Hezbollah knew how

important it was for Iran to receive the remains of its dead officer and promised to achieve that on its behalf.

Third, Hezbollah's leaders probably reckoned that the ISIS fighters would never reach Abu Kamal, figuring that either the Americans or the Russians would eliminate them along the way.

Even if they did, these fighters would soon be annihilated in Abu Kamal, once the operation for its liberation starts after ISIS is fully ejected from Raqqa by the Syrian Democratic Forces or from Deir ez-Zor by the Syrian Army.

Since entering the Syrian war zone in 2012, Hezbollah has paid little attention to its critics and cares very little for what is being said about it on the streets of Beirut or beyond in the Arab world. Clearly from its support for the agreement, it remains firmly convinced that it has done the right thing and even if it hasn't, nobody will lift a finger to stop them, mainly because nobody can.

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Iran's post-ISIS game

It wasn't Bashar Assad's exploding barrels nor his deadly siege of the city of Madaya nor his destruction of the city of Al-Qusayr and the ensuing human toll that stirred the empathy of Hezbollah. Nor was it the Russian missiles, which have razed hospitals and killed civilians in Aleppo and elsewhere, that prompted the sectarian party to warn against a human tragedy in the making.

It was, in fact, the mere thought of having American warplanes conduct air strikes against a convoy of Islamic State (ISIS) forces. Hezbollah had negotiated safe passage for those forces to areas near the Syrian-Iraqi border in eastern Syria.

What was Hezbollah thinking? How could an ISIS convoy cross about 500km between Jurud al-Qaa in Lebanon and the Syrian-Iraqi border on Syrian territory without spurring an American reaction? Were the US strikes against the convoy unexpected or perhaps the US forces reneged on some deal?

The American side never mentioned any deal with Hezbollah so the US attack against the convoy was not unexpected. Hezbollah would have known this, which

raises the question of why it brokered the deal knowing the risk.

It is clear the game is afoot for the post-ISIS phase in the region. The Iranian axis is busy reshuffling enemies and allies, especially now that Iran can no longer get any mileage out of the sectarian card.

Even among the Iraqi Shia leadership, there are calls for Iraqi national policies free of Iranian influence and more open to the Arab world. The best illustration of this is the recent visit to Saudi Arabia by Iraqi cleric Muqtada al-Sadr, head of the Sadrist Movement in Iraq and his meeting with Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman bin Abdulaziz. Many similar actions are taking place under US cover.

In Syria, the post-ISIS phase will be marked by the enactment of regional and international partnerships under US and Russian supervision and this will spur new alliances. The Qatari dispute injected new life into the relations between Turkey, Qatar and Iran.

The deal brokered by Hezbollah might be the precursor of a new Iranian strategy in the region. As an agent of Iran in the Arab zone, Hezbollah will be the spearhead of Iranian policies in Lebanon and

Syria, especially entrusted with repairing Iran's relations with other Islamic organisations.

Iran and its allies are aware that their relations with Sunni Islamic organisations have been deeply shaken. That is why they are repairing the damage by taking advantage of their relations with Turkey and Qatar. It is known that Iran instructed its proxies in the Arab world to revive anti-American discourse and close the gap with Islamic organisations such as the Muslim Brotherhood. Through Hezbollah, for example, Iran made it possible for Hamas leaders to move from Qatar and settle in Lebanon.

By touting competition with Washington in the Middle East, Iran is hoping to bridge the sectarian gap it created with Sunni Islamic organisations and win them over to its policies. This means that tensions in the region will continue under new guises because Iran is committed to fighting nationalistic plans and to spreading chaos by removing national borders.

For Iran to play a pivotal role in the post-ISIS Middle East, it must remove any potential source of threat to it in the Sunni environment, something it failed to do in the past. As examples of this

failure, we can cite Iran's siding with the Assad regime and against the wishes of most of the Syrian population, plus its influential role in Iraq, which resulted in excluding the Sunnis from power.

Now, Iran is trying to project a more positive image by appearing to have enough influence to broker agreements with organisations such as ISIS or Jabhat Fateh al-Sham.

It is also trying to see how far it can impress the general Islamic consciousness by saying that the Islamic regime in Iran can provide safe haven for Sunni Islamic organisations banned internationally or in the Arab world.

The deal brokered by Hezbollah with ISIS in Lebanon must be evaluated from the point of view of the objectives developed above. Of course, Iran was never in conflict with ISIS in Syria. Its real conflict was always with the moderate organisations among the Syrian opposition.

Iran, however, was not above using the extremist bodies to demonise the Syrian revolution. In fact, it helped implant the terrorist organisations because they were always less dangerous to its projects in the region than any nationalistic Syrian plan.

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