



December 12, 2016

## The military show of strength held by Hezbollah in the Syrian city of Al-Qusayr



A column of Hezbollah's armored vehicles, including APCs, tanks, and self-propelled guns, which appeared in the military show of strength held in the Syrian city of Al-Qusayr (Araby 21, November 14, 2016). Right: The second and third APCs were identified as BMP of Soviet origin. Left: APC identified as BMP-1, with a Sagger anti-tank missile on it.

### Units and weapons shown at the show of strength

1. On November 13, 2016, **Hezbollah held a first-of-its-kind military show of strength, exceptional in scope. The show of strength took place near the Syrian city of Al-Qusayr, in the northern Bekaa Valley** (about 15 km from the border with Lebanon). It was part of a series of events held to commemorate Hezbollah's Martyr's Day annually held by the organization on November 11 (close to Lebanon's Independence Day held on November 22, 2016). Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah did not attend the event, but a representative on his behalf, **Hashem Safi al-Din**, participated and held a speech whose contents was not disclosed in public.
2. In its military show of strength, **Hezbollah exposed some of its military power. Hezbollah's elite units, some of them taking part in the fighting in Syria**, were displayed. Among the units displayed were the **Armor Regiment,<sup>1</sup> the Artillery Regiment, the Radwan elite force** (which takes part in the campaign to take over

<sup>1</sup> The Arabic term "*foj*" will herein be referred to as "regiment."

Aleppo), and the **off-road motorcycle unit**. According to reports on the Lebanese media, these units represent the spearhead of Hezbollah's military power.

3. The military show of strength demonstrated Hezbollah weaponry (some of it for the first time). It can be divided into three categories (based on the identification of photos from the event which appear in Appendix A):

- a. **Tanks of Soviet origin and US-made APCs**, including T-72 tanks with reactive armor protection (against anti-tank missiles); T-54/T-55 and T-62 tanks; BMP APCs (one of them was identified as a BMP-1 APC with a Sagger missile mounted on it); US-made M-113 APCs with 14.5 mm guns of Soviet origin mounted on them.



**100 mm self-propelled anti-aircraft gun mounted on a hull for an SA-6 anti-aircraft missile system (As-Safir, November 16, 2016)**

- b. **Self-propelled artillery, including anti-aircraft and anti-tank guns**, 100 mm anti-tank guns and other self-propelled guns on hulls for SA-6 anti-aircraft missile systems; 122 mm rockets mounted on trucks (a truck with 50 barrels was identified); 302 mm rocket launchers mounted on trucks (with an estimated range of 90-180 km); self-propelled 122 mm guns; 130 mm (?) guns mounted on trucks; 23 mm twin anti-aircraft guns mounted on trucks.



122 mm rockets mounted on a truck. The distant smaller truck carries 50 rocket barrels (Al-Hadath News, November 22, 2016)

- c. **ATVs and off-road motorcycles**, used by Hezbollah for rapid movement and for improving its guerrilla warfare capabilities. The weaponry identified in the photos includes **ATVs with Kornet anti-tank missiles mounted on them** (at least on one of them were installed two Kornet missiles on a single launcher).



ATVs with Kornet anti-tank missiles mounted on them. A pair of Kornet missiles mounted on a single launcher can be seen on the first ATV from the left (Al-Diyar, November 15, 2016). This unique combination of ATVs and anti-tank missiles allows better mobility on the ground and increases the chances of survival of the crew.

## Assessment of the significance of the military show of strength

4. The ITIC does not know how the weapons displayed in the show of strength ended up in Hezbollah's hands. However, **it is clear that state-owned capabilities, some of them advanced, were delivered to Hezbollah**, which is a terrorist organization. The ITIC believes that the tanks, APCs, artillery and rockets (originally of Soviet origin) originated **from Syria and Iran, where most of Hezbollah's weaponry comes from**. On the other hand, the M-113 APCs, in the ITIC's assessment, are **from the Lebanese Armed Forces** (even though such APCs are also used by other armies in the region).

5. Although the weapons that appeared in the military show of strength were displayed in the context of Hezbollah's fighting **in Syria, in the future they may be directed against Israel**, taking advantage of the **combat experience acquired in Syria**. Special attention should be paid to the **self-propelled rockets** (including 302 mm rockets with a range of 90-180 km) and the ATVs with the Kornet anti-tank missiles mounted on them (which allow better mobility on the ground and improve the chances of survival of the crew).

6. In the ITIC's assessment, the military show of strength in Al-Qusayr should be considered **in the context of Hezbollah's deep involvement in Syria under Iran's directions**. Given **the major offensive in Aleppo by the Syrian forces and their allies** (including Hezbollah), **Hezbollah sought to convey to the Syrians and to the internal Lebanese scene an image of power and demonstrate that its military capabilities were not eroded due to its heavy losses in Syria** (as claimed by Hezbollah's critics). **The military show of strength was also intended to demonstrate that Hezbollah had turned from a guerrilla organization into a semi-military, well-trained organization that had acquired rich combat experience in Syria and formed new units equipped with heavy weapons (tanks and APCs) which usually characterize regular armies of states rather than a guerrilla organization.**<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> According to a Lebanese news website, **Hezbollah has recently been engaged in a reorganization process of its forces in Syria by setting up "military brigades"** that will substitute the classical structure of the organization, which is based on companies and units (lebanondebate, November 13, 2016). The message of Hezbollah's turning from a guerrilla organization into an army was also conveyed in the speech of Sheikh Naim Qassem, Nasrallah's deputy, who pointed out that Hezbollah had turned from a guerrilla organization into a "well-trained army" (see below).

7. This message is based, in the ITIC's assessment, **on a process that Hezbollah has been undergoing during the recent years, in which it changes its character and turns from a terrorist and guerrilla organization into an organization with clear military characteristics.** This framework is put into action to promote the Iranian interests not only in Lebanon or against Israel, but also in regional confrontation zones between Shiites and Sunnis in the Middle East (Syria, Iraq, and Yemen).

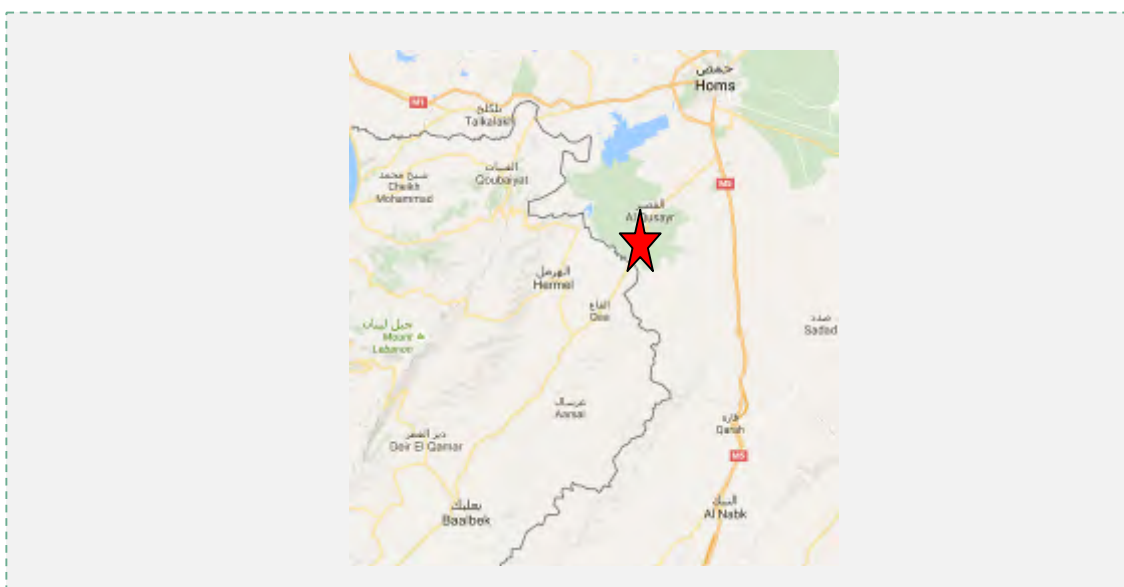
8. **Sheikh Naim Qassem, Hassan Nasrallah's deputy,** held a speech in Beirut where he **referred to the military show of strength in Al-Qusayr.** Sheikh Naim Qassem, who was quoted in the Lebanese daily newspaper *As-Safir*, noted that **Hezbollah had turned from a guerrilla organization into a “trained army” with advanced capabilities, and the military show of strength made it clear to everyone.** According to Sheikh Qassem, Hezbollah acts to protect Lebanon and its interests and **maintains a high level of coordination with the Syrian regime.**<sup>3</sup> Apparently, internal Lebanese criticism which arose following the military show of strength **caused Hezbollah to come out with a quick denial and release “clarifications” for Sheikh Naim Qassem’s statement.** Moreover, the Lebanese newspaper *As-Safir* (which was the one that reported on Sheikh Naim Qassem’s speech) joined these “clarifications.” However, the ITIC believes that **the first wording as published in As-Safir properly reflected the message which Hezbollah intended to convey** (see **Appendix B**).

9. The military show of strength in Al-Qusayr was an **exceptional event** not only due to the weaponry it presented but also because **it was the first time such an event took place in a Syrian city, outside Lebanon’s territory** (in previous years, Hezbollah marked its Martyr’s Day by events that were held in Lebanon, especially in the Beirut Shiite southern suburb). **The ITIC believes that the decision to hold the military show of strength in the Syrian city of Al-Qusayr of all other sites was not incidental but was intended to strengthen the image of power in the Syrian context.** This is because, from Hezbollah’s perspective, Al-Qusayr has a **major**

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<sup>3</sup> **What did Qassem mean by saying that the coordination between Syria and Hezbollah reached a high level?** The ITIC believes that he did not only refer to Hezbollah holding the military show of strength on Syrian soil, but **beyond that.** A demonstration of the character of coordination was published in an article by Abdallah Suleiman Ali in the Lebanese daily *As-Safir* (which is used by Hezbollah for leaking news items). The article stated that several combat commanders of Hezbollah and groups of operatives are expected to join the Syrian Fifth Corps currently being formed. According to the article, this is Hezbollah’s “dream team” which has a great deal of military know-how and quality commanding skills. The reporter referred to it as a “step forward” by Hezbollah in deepening its participation in the fighting in Syria. He added that there is a new elite force of Hezbollah which had recently joined one of the fighting fronts in Syria and would operate under the command of the Fifth Corps or in direct operational coordination with it (*As-Safir*, November 28, 2011).

**security importance**, and in spite of the fact that it is situated in Syrian territory, **it is actually under Hezbollah’s control**. Al-Qusayr has been taken over by Hezbollah on June 5, 2013, and has become a **symbol of a remarkable military victory**. In retrospect, the takeover of the Syrian city symbolized **the beginning of a process in which Hezbollah’s military involvement in the Syrian civil war increased**. This involvement currently comes into expression by thousands of Hezbollah operatives fighting in various battle zones in Syria, **including the campaign to take over Aleppo**<sup>4</sup> (for details, see **Appendix D**).



The Syrian city of Al-Qusayr, dominating the route connecting Homs with the Lebanese city of Baalbek, in the northern Bekaa Valley (Google Maps)

## Reactions to the military show of strength

10. Hezbollah's military show of strength sparked immediate reactions in Lebanon and abroad:

- a. **In the internal Lebanese scene**, the military show of strength demonstrated the fundamental contradiction between **the Lebanese identity of Hezbollah, which presents itself as “Lebanon’s defender” and as working to uphold Lebanon’s interests**; and Hezbollah being an **organization handled by Iran to promote the latter’s regional interests, representing part of the so-called “axis of resistance.”** Hezbollah’s quick denial of the use made by Sheikh Naim Qassem of the term “army” indicates that the organization is aware

<sup>4</sup> Around the time of the military show of strength in Al-Qusayr, a meeting was held in Aleppo between Hezbollah’s field officers and Russian Army officers. The meeting was convened on the Russians’ request due to Hezbollah’s major involvement in the campaign for Aleppo. The Russians congratulated Hezbollah’s commanders for the high military capabilities they have shown during the battles (Al-Akhar, November 24, 2016).

of the problematic nature of using the term and tries not to go too far. However, Lebanese senior figures and commentators were quite critical in reference to the military show of strength. Thus, for instance, **Fouad Siniora, the head of Al-Mustaqbal faction** opposing Hezbollah, noted that **“The rifle which has been pointed at Israel is now pointed into Lebanon,”** as Hezbollah **has turned into a pawn in the hands of Iran**, which employs it to intervene in the internal affairs of Iraq, Syria, Yemen and Lebanon (Al-Arabiya, November 13, 2016) (for reactions in Lebanon, see **Appendix C**).



Cartoon presenting Hezbollah's military show of strength in Al-Qusayr as yet another step toward floundering in the bloodshed of fighting in Syria. The Arabic title reads, “A Hezbollah military show [of strength] in Al-Qusayr, Syria” (Lebanon 360, November 16, 2016)

b. **In the international and the internal Lebanese scenes**, the fact that **M-113 APCs took part in the show of strength raised questions as to the way Hezbollah acquired them**. The Lebanese Army spokesman was quick to deny any connection to the APCs which are in Hezbollah's possession. However, Lebanese senior figures and commentators estimated that **these were APCs previously provided by the United States to the Lebanese Army as part of the American military support**, and then they were transferred from the Lebanese Army to Hezbollah. **The US State Department spokeswoman Elizabeth Trudeau** noted that the American embassy was working with the Lebanese armed forces to investigate the issue of Western weapons in the hands of Hezbollah. She noted that the photos show M-113 APCs, which are common in the region.



US-made M-113 APCs in Hezbollah's military show of strength  
(treckat.com, November 14, 2016)



A Lebanese Army announcement, on its official Facebook page, that the military vehicles (i.e., the M-113 APCs) were not taken from the Lebanese Army depots and do not belong to it  
(official Facebook page of the Lebanese Army, November 15, 2016)

## Appendices

11. Following are four appendices:

- a. **Appendix A:** Hezbollah's military show of strength in Al-Qusayr and the identification of units and weapons shown there
- b. **Appendix B:** Presenting Hezbollah's military power as an "army" by Hassan Nasrallah's deputy, and Hezbollah's quick denial



- c. **Appendix C:** Internal Lebanese reactions to Hezbollah's military show of strength
- d. **Appendix D:** The Syrian city of Al-Qusayr and its importance for Hezbollah

## Appendix A

# Hezbollah's military show of strength in Al-Qusayr and the identification of units and weapons shown there

## Overview

1. On November 13, 2016, Hezbollah held a military show of strength in the Syrian city of Al-Qusayr on the occasion of the “Martyr’s Day”, commemorated by the organization every year. Lebanese and Arabic media reported that **several hundred uniformed soldiers, belonging to various Hezbollah units, took part in the military show of strength, and that many weapons** were displayed there. Photos published showed M-113 APCs with 14.5 anti-aircraft machine guns; T-54 / T-55, T-62 and T-72 tanks; Russian-made self-propelled artillery, and Russian Kornet anti-tank missiles mounted on European made ATVs.

2. **The show of strength displayed units taking part in the fighting in Syria, including ones that reportedly were recently formed and became operational.** Among the units displayed were elite units, including the Armor and Artillery Regiments and the Rapid Deployment force (Al-Radwan), reportedly representing Hezbollah's spearhead (debate, November 13, 2016). The armor vehicles that took part in the event were reportedly **part of the armor brigade** that Hezbollah formed about a year ago and that has now become operational. In addition, an **off-road motorcycle for rapid deployment** was also displayed in the military show of strength.

3. **Hezbollah refrained from giving the event too much publicity.** No crowd is visible in the photos documenting the show of strength. In addition, Hezbollah did not cover the event on the TV channels affiliated with it (Al-Manar and Al-Mayadeen), and the photos and information were published mainly on social media. The contents of the speech held in the event by **Hashem Safi al-Din**, Hassan Nasrallah's representative, was also not disclosed in public.

4. **Hezbollah reportedly made sure to obtain the Syrian regime’s authorization to hold the event in a Syrian city.** Sheikh Naim Qassem mentioned that the coordination between Hezbollah and the Syrian regime is on a very high level and this

included the show of strength in Al-Qusayr. According to **Sami Kleib, the reporter of the Lebanese daily As-Safir**, the event was fully coordinated with the Syrian Army and Syrian president in order to prove that Hezbollah's fate is tied with the fate of Syria. In addition, it was intended to raise morale in Syria and demonstrate to the Syrians that victory is certain even if it is delayed (As-Safir, November 16, 2016).

## Units and weapons displayed in the show of strength Al-Radwan elite force

5. **Al-Radwan force**, which took part in the show of strength, is a Hezbollah elite force whose formation was initiated by Imad Mughniyeh. The force was formed after Mughniyeh's death and is called after him (Imad Mughniyeh's codename was Hajj Radwan). The force operatives participated in the campaign to take over Al-Qusayr and reportedly were instrumental in achieving Hezbollah's victory.

6. On August 2016, it was reported that the force operatives reached Aleppo to assist in the battle for the south Aleppo neighborhood of Al-Ramoussa, which represents the main route to Aleppo's eastern neighborhoods held by the rebels (Al-Diyar, August 6, 2016). In September 2016, Syrian Army forces, with the assistance of Al-Radwan force, managed to take over the neighborhood, preparing the way for the offensive on east Aleppo taking place these days.



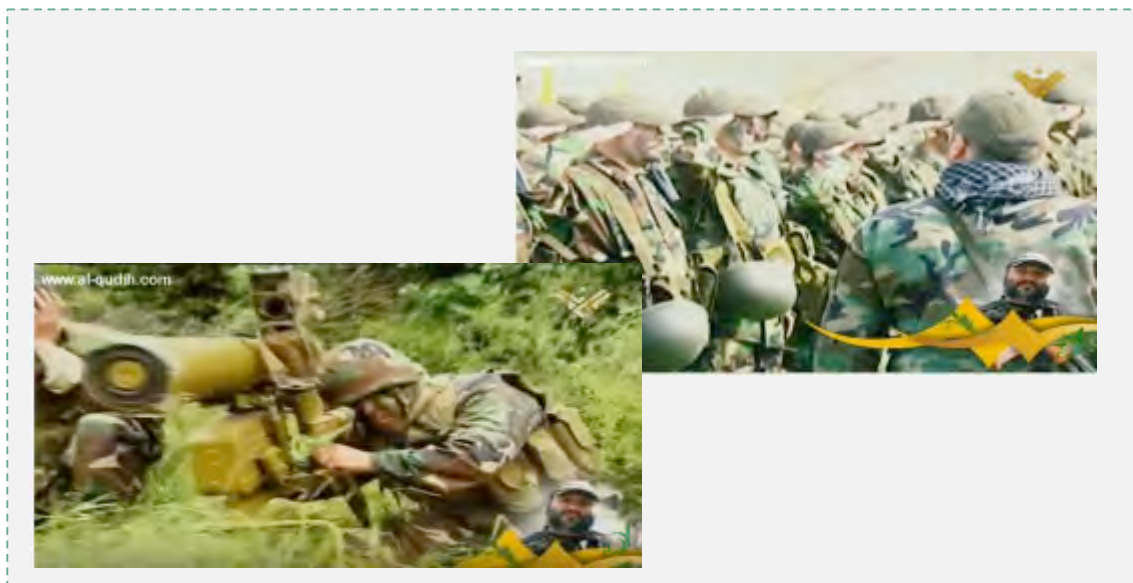
**Photos of three Hezbollah operatives, apparently from the Al-Radwan force, who were killed in battle in the area of Aleppo's neighborhood of Al-Ramoussa. The photos were published on Iranian websites (Syrian-mirror.net, August 11, 2016)**

7. The Iranian Fars News Agency, quoting "media sources," reported that the force commander is **Haytham Ali Al-Tabataba'i**, Lebanese, son of an Iranian father and a

Lebanese mother from southern Lebanon. He rose in Hezbollah's chain of command until he reached the position of commander of the Al-Radwan force. According to some "media sources," he was removed to another military position in Syria, whereas other sources claim that he still serves as the commander of the Al-Radwan force (Fars News, August 12, 2016). On October 20, 2016, the US Department of State designated him as a Specially Designated Global Terrorist.



**Right: The flag of the Al-Radwan force in a photo taken at Hezbollah's show of strength in Al-Qusayr (Nabatieh news network, November 13, 2016)**



**Photos from a video released by Hezbollah's Al-Manar Channel about the Al-Radwan force. Left: Hezbollah operative operating a Fagot / Konkurs anti-tank missile. Imad Mughniyeh's figure is seen below (bottom right) (YouTube, January 22, 2014)**

## The Armor Regiment

8. According to the Iranian Al-Alam Channel, one of Imad Mughniyeh's ideas as a lesson from the Second Lebanon War was to form an armor unit. According to Iranian media, the existence of the Armor Regiment was exposed for the first time in Hezbollah's show of strength in Al-Qusayr (Al-Alam Channel, November 16, 2016).



The emblem of Hezbollah's Armor Regiment, seen also on one of the tanks that appeared in the armored column at the military show of strength in Al-Qusayr (Hassan Rida's Twitter account, November 13, 2016)



T-54 / T-55 tanks in the armored column of Hezbollah's show of strength in Al-Qusayr (treckat.com, November 14, 2016). The emblem of the Armor Regiment can be seen on the first tank to the left.

## Rapid deployment off-road motorcycle unit



Rapid deployment off-road motorcycle unit (Araby Press, November 13, 2016). The weaponry behind them was identified as 23 mm twin anti-aircraft guns mounted on trucks.

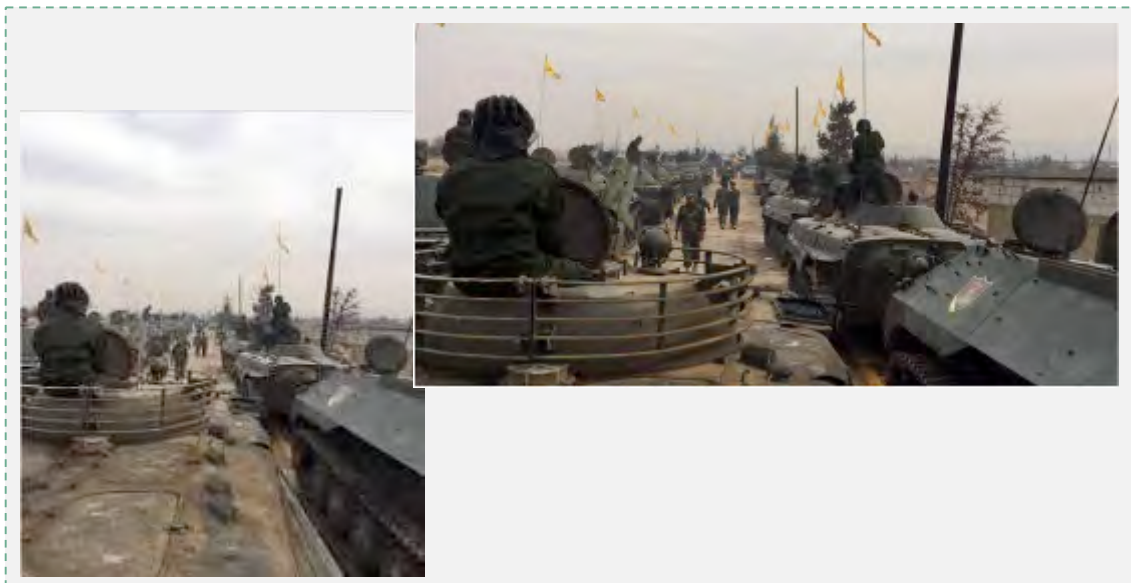
## Weaponry displayed in the show of strength Tanks and APCs



T-62 tank (Al-Araby, November 14 and 15, 2016)



**A column of tanks in the show of strength. The second tank from the left was identified as T-54 / T-55 (Al-Nabatieh news network, November 13, 2016)**



**BMP APCs. Right: The second and the third APCs were identified as BMP. Left: BMP-1 APC, with a Sagger missile mounted on it (Araby 21, November 14, 2016)**



**US-made M-113 APCs, with 14.5 mm guns mounted on them (treckat.com, November 14, 2016)**



**100 mm self-propelled anti-aircraft guns on hulls for an SA-6 anti-aircraft missile system (treckat.com, November 14, 2016)**





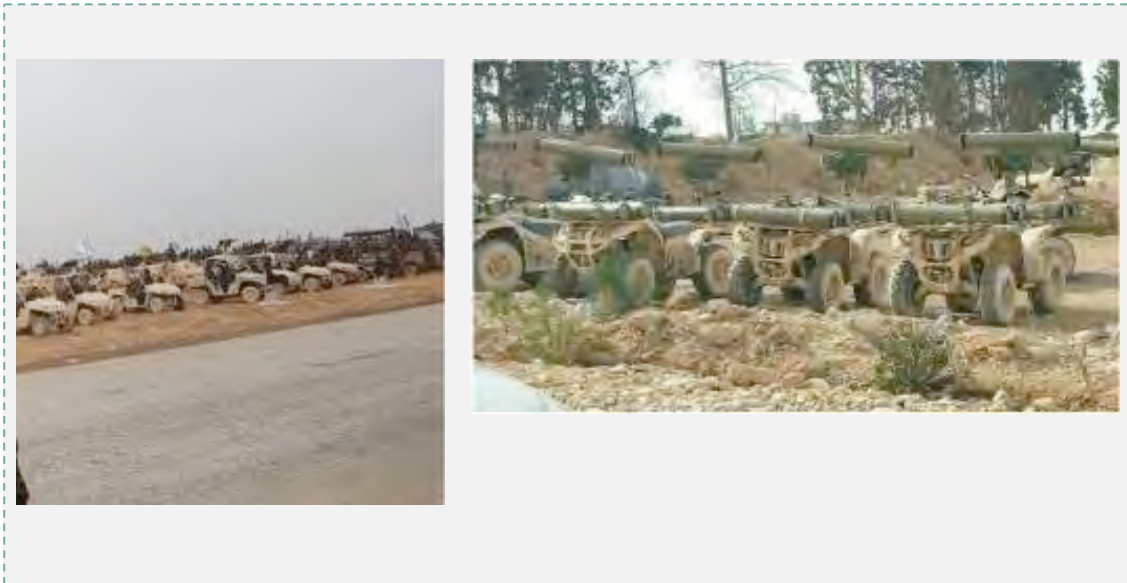
**100 mm self-propelled anti-aircraft gun on a hull for an SA-6 anti-aircraft missile system (As-Safir, November 16, 2016)**



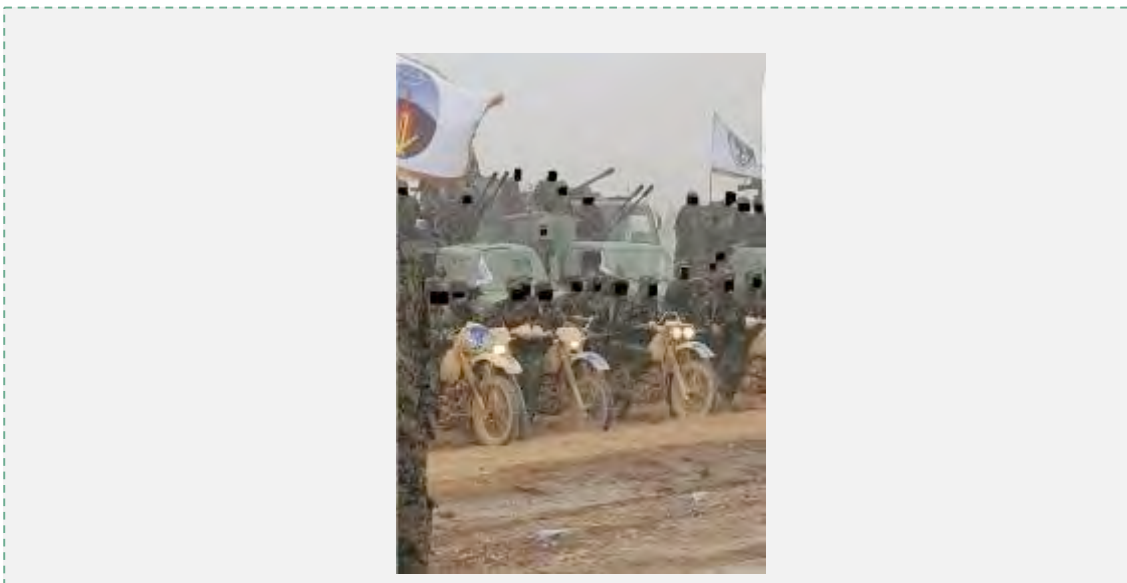
**Self-propelled gun on a hull for an SA-6 anti-aircraft missile system. On the right, there is a tank column, the first of which has been identified as T-72 with reactive armor (i.e., armor against anti-tank missiles).<sup>5</sup> An APC column can be seen on the left. At least the first ones are M-113 (Lara Saqer's Twitter account, November 14, 2016)**

<sup>5</sup> FrontPageMag.com, a conservative American website, reported (November 22, 2016) on the weaponry displayed in the show of strength. Among other things it was reported that T-72 tanks with reactive armor participated in the event. The site also reported on the participation of R-330P electronic warfare vehicles. Israeli media also reported that T-72 tanks took part in the event (Ynet, November 14, 2016).

## Means for improved mobility of anti-tank missiles and ground operatives



ATVs with Kornet anti-tank missiles mounted on them. A pair of Kornet missiles on a single launcher can be seen on the first ATV from the left<sup>6</sup> (Al-Diyar, November 15, 2016). This unique combination of ATVs and anti-tank missiles allows better mobility on the ground and increases the chances of survival of the crew.



Rapid deployment off-road motorcycles (Araby Press, November 13, 2016). Seen behind them are 23 mm twin anti-aircraft guns on trucks.

<sup>6</sup> Israeli media reported that the ATVs are made in Europe (Ynet, an article by Ron Ben Ishay, November 14, 2016)

## Self-propelled guns, rockets, and anti-tank missiles



(Apparently, a 122 mm) rocket launcher (Al-Araby al-Jadid, November 14 and 15, 2016)



122 mm rockets on a truck. On the distant truck (which looks smaller), there are a total of 50 barrels (Al-Hadath News, November 22, 2016)



**The truck on the left carries a 302 mm rocket launcher (estimated range of 90-180 km). The first truck in the middle carries a 122 mm rocket launcher. On the right: a 122 mm self-propelled gun (Al-Hadath News, November 22, 2016)**



**From right to left: 302 mm rockets on a truck. Behind it was identified an (apparently 130 mm) self-propelled gun on a truck (Al-Hadath News, November 22, 2016)**



**The first truck from the right carries 302 mm rockets. The second truck from the right carries (apparently, a 130 mm) gun (Al-Hadath News, November 22, 2016)**

## Appendix B

### Presenting Hezbollah's military power by Nasrallah's deputy as an army, and Hezbollah's quick denial

1. **Sheikh Naim Qassem, Hassan Nasrallah's deputy**, made a speech on November 16, 2016, during a meeting that took place at the Beirut Cultural Center for Development of Islamic Thought (As-Safir, Lebanon, November 16, 2016). In his speech, which had many repercussions on the media, he referred to the Al-Qusayr military show of strength and to the character of Hezbollah's military power, as well as to the coordination with Syria: **“The coordination between us and the Syrian leadership is on a very high level, and the military show of strength is part of the conduct on the ground.”** He added, **“We have a trained army, and the resistance [i.e., Hezbollah] does not rely on guerrilla methods anymore. We have become more armed, more trained, and we have acquired advanced experiences [i.e., advanced capabilities].** [The aim of] all that [is] for defending Lebanon and for the Lebanese interest” (As-Safir, Lebanon, November 16, 2016).

وقال **قاسم** إن «التنسيق بينا وبين القيادة السورية عال جدا والاستعراض العسكري جزء من الممارسة الميدانية»، مشيراً إلى أنه «أصبح لدينا جيش مدرب ولم تعد المقاومة تعتمد على أسلوب حرب العصابات، وأصبحنا أكثر تسليحا وتدريباً وامتلكنا خبرات متطورة، وكل ذلك من أجل حماية لبنان ولمصلحة لبنان».

A screenshot of the quote from Sheikh Naim Qassem's speech during an open meeting at the Beirut Cultural Center for Development of Islamic Thought (As-Safir, Lebanon, November 16, 2016)



A screenshot of the article about Sheikh Naim Qassem in the Lebanese daily As-Safir. The title reads, “Qassem: We have an army... and the military show of strength is a message for everyone.” Sheikh Naim Qassem’s photo which appears in the article is an archive photo (As-Safir, Lebanon, November 16, 2016)

2. Sheikh Naim Qassem’s statement, which strengthened the message conveyed by the Al-Qusayr show of strength, according to which **Hezbollah holds an army of its own side by side with the Lebanese army**, sparked internal Lebanese criticism and caused the organization (and the daily As-Safir) to come out with denials and “clarifications”:

a. On November 17, 2016, As-Safir published a “**clarification**” which had **been given by Hezbollah’s press office**. According to the “clarification,” someone argued in the meeting that Hezbollah had turned into an army and that the military show of strength in Al-Qusayr was intended to convey this message. Sheikh Naim Qassem, according to Hezbollah’s “clarification,” did not respond at all to these words.

b. As-Safir journalist Qassem Qassir<sup>7</sup> allegedly checked the recorded contents and found out (as he claimed) that one of the persons attending the meeting asked Sheikh Naim Qassem about Hezbollah’s becoming an army

<sup>7</sup> Qassem Qassir is a political commentator, expert on Hezbollah and maintains close relations with the organization.

instead of relying on guerrilla warfare in the struggle against the Israeli enemy. Sheikh Naim Qassem replied that what is important for Hezbollah is “to defend Lebanon by any means possible, and it is important for us not to have our soldiers involved at all in internal political struggles.” Therefore, the editor of the newspaper asked to apologize to Sheikh Qassem mainly because of the large publicity his statement had been given (As-Safir, Lebanon, November 17, 2016).



Hezbollah's denial of the statement attributed to Sheikh Naim Qassem, with the addition of a clarification and apology by the editorial staff of the Lebanese daily As-Safir (As-Safir, Lebanon, November 17, 2016)

3. The ITIC believes that in spite of the “clarifications” and denials, **Sheikh Naim Qassem's statement accurately reflected the message which Hezbollah intended to convey by the Al-Qusayr military show of strength.** His statement also expresses the high level of cooperation between Hezbollah (and Iran) and Syria, as well as the processes of becoming a semi-military organization which Hezbollah has been undergoing during the recent years.



## Appendix C

### Internal Lebanese reactions to Hezbollah's military show of strength

1. **Hezbollah opponents vehemently criticized the Al-Qusayr military show of strength.** The Lebanese media raised a number of issues following the event, including: what was the purpose of the show of strength; what was the message Hezbollah sought to convey to Syria and Lebanon; and where did Hezbollah get the M-113 APCs from. **Israel occupied a marginal place in this discourse, maybe because the event was conceived in the Syrian context.** Hezbollah on its part maintained a low media profile. The Iranian media provided informative reports on the military show of strength, accompanied by photographs published in the Lebanese media.

2. Following are a number of reactions:

a. **Mazen Ibrahim, the manager of Al-Jazeera office in Beirut,** said that **Hezbollah intended the military show of strength to deliver messages to all sides related to the Syrian affair both in Lebanon and abroad.** He said Hezbollah mainly wished to emphasize that **it was no longer an organization conducting guerrilla warfare but a trans-border army which is partner to the Syrian regime in fighting and in decision making, and that Hezbollah is a factor to reckon with in any possible arrangement of the Syrian crisis** (Aljazeera.net, November 14, 2016).

b. **Fouad Siniora, the head of Al-Mustaqbal faction,** said that the military show of strength held by Hezbollah on Al-Qusayr indicates disrespect to Lebanon, and the messages it conveyed are in the Syrian context. According to Siniora, the organization has so far gained popularity in Lebanon because it kept citing the confrontation with Israel. However, he said, **“The rifle that has been pointed at Israel is now pointed into Lebanon.”** Siniora said that **Hezbollah had turned into a pawn in Iran’s hands, and the latter employs it to interfere in the internal affairs of Iraq, Syria, Yemen and Lebanon** (Al-Arabiya, November 13, 2016).

c. **Amid (Brigadier General) Nizar Abd al-Qader, a retired Lebanese Army officer,** said in an interview that Hezbollah's military show of strength

compromised the sovereignty of Syria and Lebanon by establishing the military anarchy prevailing at the border between the two countries. According to him, the military bases erected by Hezbollah along the Syrian-Lebanese border on the pretext of “struggle against terrorism” expose both countries to international lawsuits (Al-Arabi Al-Jadid, November 14, 2016). He estimated that Hezbollah held the military show of strength in Al-Qusayr with the objective of raising the morale of its operatives fighting in Syria and increasing its public support in spite of the large number of casualties it has been sustaining during the fighting (lebanonfiles.com, November 15, 2016).

d. **Ashraf Rifi, the Justice Minister in Lebanon’s transitional government,** denounced the military show of strength. He said that the fact that it took place only several days before the Lebanese Independence Day (occurring on November 22) **compromised Lebanon's image**. According to Rifi, **Hezbollah is a Lebanese terrorist militia** which is trying to show the international community through its military show of strength that it is party to the struggle against terrorism. However, it is actually a “fake currency,” as terrorism cannot fight terrorism (Facebook page of Ashraf Rifi, November 14, 2016).

e. **Nadim Gemayel, a member of the Lebanese parliament,** uploaded to his Twitter account a post on the occasion of the Lebanese Independence Day. In his post, he presented a photo from Hezbollah's military show of strength in Al-Qusayr, a photo from a demonstration held by the Lebanese Tawhid Party in Al-Jahiliyah (in the Shouf Mountains), and a photo from a military parade of the Lebanese Army, and wrote, “One legitimate parade is necessary for a real independence” (Twitter account of Nadim Gemayel, November 22, 2016).



A post by Lebanese MP Nadim Gemayel, calling for one legitimate parade (Twitter account of Nadim Gemayel, November 22, 2016)

3. Following is an **editorial that appeared on As-Safir**, containing messages corresponding to those of Hezbollah (November 15, 2016):

a. As-Safir's political editor (the author of the editorial) notes that Israel follows the military show of strength and the weapons displayed there, and it must be worried. He says the weapons and equipment displayed at the military show of strength represent a challenge for Israel's deterrence.

b. According to As-Safir's political editor, the photos demonstrate that Hezbollah, having acquired experience during four years of fighting in Syria, is not a weak, defeated organization but rather an army with a [military] structure and experience just like other armies.

c. By holding its military show of strength, Hezbollah showed that it operates in both Lebanon and Syria and defends the Syrian regime and the Lebanese government. This underlines Hezbollah's role in confrontations with world jihad elements ("takfiri operatives") and vis-à-vis Israel on all fronts.

4. **Sami Kleib** wrote an article in the **Lebanese daily As-Safir**, entitled "Hezbollah is walking away from Lebanon and establishes itself in the region." In his article, he writes that **the military show of strength was held in full coordination with the Syrian Army and with the Syrian president**. Hezbollah wanted to raise morale in Syria and show the Syrians that victory is certain albeit delayed for a little while. He quotes Hassan Nasrallah, who said time and again that **Hezbollah had become a regional power** (As-Safir, November 16, 2016).

## Appendix D

### The Syrian city of Al-Qusayr and its importance for Hezbollah



The Syrian city of Al-Qusayr and its surrounding region (Wikimapia)

### The importance of Al-Qusayr for Hezbollah

1. The Syrian city of Al-Qusayr is situated about 35 km south of Homs and about 15 km from the border with Lebanon. Its population numbers about 40,000, most of them Sunni Muslims. There's also a Christian-Catholic minority (about 10% of the inhabitants) and several hundred inhabitants of the Alawite sect. The city had been a vibrant agricultural and commercial center in the past, holding commercial relations with Lebanon.
2. Since the beginning of the civil war in Syria, Iran and Hezbollah considered the conservation of the Syrian regime and the "axis of resistance" a **paramount strategic interest**. The reason is that Bashar Assad is the main ally of Iran and Hezbollah in the "axis of resistance" which allows Iran a firm foothold and political and military influence at the very heart of the Middle East. The fall of the Assad regime was conceived by Iran and Hezbollah as a disastrous scenario, which might have weakened Iran's regional status and compromised Hezbollah's military capabilities and its political influence in Lebanon.
3. In more concrete terms, in Hezbollah's perspective, **the city of Al-Qusayr has a major importance due to its proximity to Lebanon** (about 15 km) and because it

dominates the road leading from Homs to the northern Bekaa Valley (Hermel district). From there, the road leads to Baalbek along the Bekaa Valley, a region which is the place of residence of a Shiite population, with Hezbollah's strongholds. The road leading from Syria to the northern Bekaa Valley represents a supply route through which Hezbollah can deliver weapons from Syria to Lebanon and vice versa – it can also serve for the passage of reinforcements of Hezbollah operatives and weapons to Syria. In that same way, the rebels could send through the area of Al-Qusayr supply and reinforcements to their supporters in Lebanon, mainly in the Tripoli region, until it was taken over by Hezbollah.

4. Shiite solidarity also played an important role from Hezbollah's perspective: a large Shiite population resides in the outskirts of the city, along with Sunni and Christian inhabitants. Hezbollah strongly identifies with this population, which maintains close relations with the Shiite inhabitants of Lebanon. According to Hezbollah, the weakening of the Syrian regime's control in Al-Qusayr and the entire region led to harassment of the Shiite population in the region and required Hezbollah, as the organization deemed right, to come to their rescue. In a speech given on April 30, 2013, Hassan Nasrallah elaborated on the situation created in the Al-Qusayr region as the fighting in Syria intensified. Following are highlights of his speech (Al-Manar, April 30, 2013):

“With regard to the outskirts of Al-Qusayr, I’ve already discussed that issue in the past and noted that there are over 30,000 Lebanese residents in a number of towns, including Muslims and Christians, and they do not belong to one single sect. I said that they have become a target, and they have been exposed to incendiaries, the burning of their homes, to occupation of several villages, killing, kidnapping, and being prevented from going to work and to their fields. They are threatened by their very existence in those villages... The danger has become more and more imminent during the recent months as a result of the events on the ground [i.e., in Syria], when the Syrian Army was forced to evacuate a number of regions and withdraw from them. Thus, these people [i.e., Shiites residing in the Al-Qusayr region] were standing face to face with the armed groups [...] It was only natural that the Syrian Army and the popular forces supporting it, and the residents of this region, would receive proper support [...] in order to cope with the threat [...]”

## The takeover of Al-Qusayr by Hezbollah (May 19 – June 5, 2013)

5. During the first year of the civil war in Syria, Hezbollah strictly maintained a low profile of involvement in the fighting.<sup>8</sup> During 2012, military operatives were sent to Syria on a limited scale. They mainly served in advisory and security capacities, and their active involvement in the fighting had been limited. It seems that the major change in the scope of Hezbollah's involvement took place in the first half of 2013, given Iran and Hezbollah's assessment that the survivability of the Syrian regime and their interests in Syria were at greater risk. Hezbollah's participation in the takeover of Al-Qusayr was the first significant expression of a deeper involvement by Hezbollah in the civil war in Syria.

6. Hezbollah's fighting in the Al-Qusayr region began during the first months of 2012. It intensified during the first half of 2013 and ended in summer 2013. On May 19, 2013, the Syrian Army, combined with thousands of Hezbollah operatives, opened an extensive attack with the aim of reaching the center of Al-Qusayr and taking over the city. The attack included airstrikes and artillery fire by the Syrian Army at targets in Al-Qusayr.

7. Hezbollah's operatives were at the spearhead of the attack and reached the center of the city, which was defended by operatives of the Al-Nusra Front (Al-Qaeda's branch in Syria). According to sources in Hezbollah, the organization operatives managed on May 19 to arrive at the city hall, one of the key places in Al-Qusayr (Al-Monitor, June 1, 2013). **On June 5, 2013, the city was taken over.** About 300 Hezbollah operatives died in the battles.

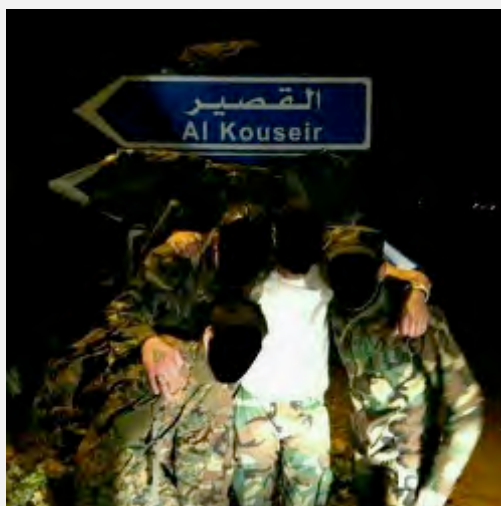
8. After the takeover of Al-Qusayr, Hezbollah acted to establish its hold in the territory, and the Al-Qusayr region turned into an area under Hezbollah's influence. Following the takeover of Al-Qusayr, Hezbollah intensified its involvement in the battles against the rebel organizations in the Qalamoun Mountains, along the Syrian-Lebanon border, with the purpose of achieving security control over the region. Hezbollah's activity in the Qalamoun region and the Al-Qusayr region indeed managed to halt to a great deal (albeit not entirely) attempts by ISIS and other organizations to carry out terrorist attacks in Lebanon.

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<sup>8</sup> For details about the beginning of Hezbollah's involvement in the fighting in Syria, see the ITIC's Information Bulletin from June 2, 2013: "Hezbollah's Involvement in the Civil War in Syria."



Right: A Hezbollah operative in Al-Qusayr stepping on one of the fighters who had been captured (Facebook page of the residents of South Lebanon, May 19, 2013). Left: An illustration on a Facebook page: "Together with you, Hezbollah, we reached the city of Al-Qusayr" (Facebook page of the Shahid Mohammad Khalil Nasser al-Din, May 19, 2013)



Hezbollah operatives in the Al-Qusayr area (Facebook page of the Campaign to Defend Al-Set Zaynab Shrine, May 14, 2013)



**Hezbollah operatives in Al-Qusayr**  
**(Facebook page of the Shahid Mohammad Khalil Nasser al-Din, May 19, 2013)**