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Hezbollah without Damascus:

Adapting in the wake of a severed supply line

Hezbollah has suffered a significant blow with the loss of its Syrian supply route and major setbacks on the battlefield. However, the movement's ability to adapt – through local weaponry production, scaling back operations, and tapping into black market networks – has enabled its survival and set it on a path to recovery as the year draws to an unpredictable close.



Photo Credit: The Cradle

Since the devastating setbacks in September, Hezbollah has faced a grueling test of resilience. The losses have been severe – key leaders, cadres, and fighters have fallen – but the damage has not been limited to the human cost.

A significant portion of Hezbollah's extensive arsenal, spanning light and heavy weaponry, has been targeted and disrupted, leaving the group in need of urgent reconstruction alongside its allies in the Axis of Resistance.

As the guns fell temporarily silent in Lebanon with the onset of an already violated ceasefire, the conflict took on a new dimension in neighboring Syria. Armed factions led by Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) – formerly known as the Nusra Front – launched a swift and coordinated offensive, seizing one city after another, leading to the fall of Damascus.

The speed of their advance triggered the collapse of Syrian president Bashar al-Assad’s government in a matter of 11 days. Assad's government was a critical ally of Hezbollah and a key logistical artery for the transfer of weapons and fighters from Iran. This collapse marked the severing of a lifeline that had long sustained Hezbollah’s military operations.

Hezbollah loses the Syrian supply line

Meanwhile, Israel intensified its aerial campaign, carrying out hundreds of precision strikes across Syria. These targeted not only the Syrian army’s strategic stockpiles but also warehouses used by Hezbollah and its allies as reserve storage. The Secretary-General of Hezbollah, Sheikh Naim Qassem, confirmed on Saturday what many had already suspected: the supply route through Syria has been severed.

“Yes, Hezbollah has lost the military supply route through Syria at this stage, but this loss is a detail in the resistance's work,” Qassem said before adding, “A new regime could come, and this route could return to normal, and we could look for other ways.”

This predicament raises fundamental questions: Can Hezbollah overcome the loss of its most vital supply line? What strategies might allow it to adapt to this new reality? Are there alternative pathways to replenish its capabilities?

The role of domestic manufacturing

Hezbollah's resilience in overcoming past crises has largely relied on its focus on local manufacturing, especially of missiles and drones. Over the years, the resistance movement has domestically developed and modified weapon systems, combining ingenuity with limited resources.

Many of the launchers destroyed in recent strikes were locally produced, including those designed for saturation missile launches like the Fadi rocket.

In the field of precision missiles, systems such as Nasr 1 and Qader 2 appear to be modified versions of older models, like Zelzal and Khaybar, equipped with upgraded guidance systems. While most physical components – bodies, warheads, and fuel – are produced locally, critical electronic parts, despite being smaller and more discreet, may have been smuggled in or assembled using civilian-grade materials.

The same applies to drones. Systems like the Ababil 2-T and Shahed 101 have gained prominence precisely because their design relies heavily on civilian technologies: engines,

imaging devices, and basic guidance systems. Warheads are then tailored to meet specific operational needs.

The expertise to produce these weapons remains unharmed. Yet what is uncertain is the extent to which Hezbollah can rebuild its production capacity under current pressures, given the difficulties in acquiring specialized components like thermal sensors or military-grade electronics.

Adapting strategy: Downsizing and redefining priorities

Faced with immense logistical challenges and diminishing resources, Hezbollah may need to transition from an offensive strategy to a more defensive stance. Previously, the group maintained two distinct forces in southern Lebanon: the geographic defense units, such as the Nasr and Aziz that were tasked with holding territory, and the elite Radwan Brigade trained for offensive operations deep into northern Israel.

The changing realities on the ground may now compel Hezbollah to redirect its offensive forces to bolster defensive operations. This would not only reduce logistical demands but also align with the group's immediate needs: secrecy, flexibility, and a focus on resilience.

Naturally, defensive operations require fewer specialized weapons and mostly rely on geographic familiarity and asymmetric tactics. The recent Israeli strikes primarily inflicted losses on offensive capabilities – assets that may no longer be immediately necessary.

By consolidating its forces, Hezbollah can reallocate its resources to rebuilding its defensive infrastructure while maintaining strategic reserves for contingencies.

Smuggling and the black market

While the Syrian supply route has been disrupted due to the collapse of the Assad government, alternative avenues for acquiring arms remain. Lebanon's black market has long served as a source for small and medium weapons, including machine guns, sniper rifles, and ammunition.

Smuggling networks – by land, sea, or even air – have proven resilient in the past and may provide a temporary solution. Despite international monitoring efforts led by an unreliable UNIFIL and western powers, Hezbollah could take advantage of enforcement gaps, similar to how weapons shipments previously reached Syrian rebels undetected.

Smuggling is risky, but history shows that where there is demand, supply routes will emerge – however clandestine they may be.

As long as trade routes exist, so will the black market and smuggling, allowing people to acquire what they need at the right price, much like the Lutfallah ship did when it entered to supply arms to the Syrian rebels in the past.

A partner in post-Assad Syria?

While Hezbollah was once firmly aligned with Assad, the movement has shown pragmatism in dealing with Syria's new leadership – despite ongoing hostilities and Israeli incursions. The new authority in Damascus faces a stark choice: align with Arab states that favor normalization with the occupation state, or seek alternative alliances to secure its survival.

If it opts for the latter, a renewed partnership with Iran and Hezbollah cannot be ruled out. However, such a scenario remains distant, contingent on shifting political and military dynamics. As Naim Qassem said in his speech on Saturday:

“We also hope that this new ruling party will consider Israel an enemy and not normalise relations with it. These are the headlines that will affect the nature of the relationship between us and Syria.”

The blow dealt to Hezbollah in recent months is undeniable, but it is far from decisive. While the loss of Syria as a supply line poses a significant challenge, the resistance movement’s history is one of adaptation and resilience.

From local manufacturing to strategic downsizing and exploiting black market networks, Hezbollah has proven its ability to adjust to even the harshest circumstances. While the current phase may be one of the most challenging the group has encountered, it is not without precedent.

Since its formation during the Lebanese Civil War and Israel’s ill-fated invasion of south Lebanon, Hezbollah has consistently demonstrated its ability to operate discreetly, adapt strategically, and endure when survival is at stake. Regardless of whether the resistance movement will ally with the new Syrian government or not, its primary focus remains clear: to weather the storm and emerge intact, prepared to face whatever challenges lie ahead.

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