
RUSSIA AND HEZBOLLAH 'OFFICIALLY' WORKING TOGETHER IN SYRIA

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Russia and Hezbollah have begun official military coordination in Syria at the behest of Moscow, according to a report published Thursday on a pro-Hezbollah news site.

The pro-Hezbollah Lebanese website al-Akhbar reported that Hezbollah officials met with senior Russian officers in the embattled city of Aleppo last week in the first official and direct meeting between the two sides since the start of Moscows year-long military involvement in the Syrian civil war.

The report notes that Russian and Hezbollah officials have met before in non-official capacities, such as in battle operations rooms.

The meeting, reportedly arranged by Russia, was said to have established continual communication and shared channels between the two sides over whats happening on the battlefield and includes future plans.

Russia is especially interested in coordinating with Hezbollah's infantry on the ground in Aleppo, where airstrikes are less effective in the densely packed city, the report said.

The Iranian-backed militia is estimated to have 6,000-8,000 fighters in Syria, but some analysts think the number could be higher.

There has already been clear coordination between Hezbollah and Russia, and between Russia and other Shiite militias in Syria as well, said Michael Horowitz, director of Intelligence at Prime Source, a Middle East-based geopolitical consultancy, adding that he wasnt surprised by the report.

The decision to publicize relations between Hezbollah and Moscow as official likely stems from Hezbollah's increasing desire to depict itself as a conventional army, Horowitz said. He noted that Thursdays report follows Hezbollah's first military parade in Syria in mid-November, during which the militia flaunted its advanced Russian and US weaponry.

The new official coordination between Moscow and the Shiite terror group will not affect Hezbollah's open-war stance towards Israel, the report said.

Likud MK Avi Dichter, a former head of the Shin Bet security agency, warned on November 16 that Russian interests in the Middle East do not coincide with Israel's and said the Jewish state must be vigilant concerning Russia's growing influence in the region, despite increasing diplomatic relations between Moscow and Jerusalem.

Whereas Israel considers Iran, the patron of Hezbollah, its greatest foe in the region and prioritizes defending itself against the Lebanese terror group, Russia does not view Iran and its proxies according to the level of threat they pose or broadcast toward Israel, Dichter said in an interview with Reuters, adding that Russia views Hezbollah positively as the errand lackey of Iran in Syria and Lebanon, [and is] backing the Shiite militia activity in Iraq and Syria.

Israel has reportedly carried out numerous airstrikes in Syria since the civil war began in a bid to stop the smuggling of advanced weapons to Hezbollah, but has otherwise refrained from becoming involved in the deadly conflict that has engulfed the country.

Kaynak/Source: