

Doc ID: AFGP-2002-000261

Title: Zahleh Battle

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Date: Unknown

Length: 24 pages

## Synopsis

The author performs a systematic analysis of the Battle of Zahleh, a battle fought in April 1981 between Syrian forces and Lebanese Christian forces for the strategic city of Zahleh in the al-Biqqa' valley of Lebanon.

## Key Themes

### *Chapter 1 - Summary*

Syrian forces attempted to remove Lebanese Christian forces from the Christian city of Zahleh, which they considered to be blocking their routes into Lebanon. The battle was a tactical victory for Syria, in that Lebanese Christian forces were forced to leave, but a strategic victory for the Lebanese Christian forces, in that outside forces began intervening as a result. The Syrians suffered from poor tactics and command and control, while Lebanese forces maintained contact with the outside world, and scored propaganda victories.

Zahleh was not involved in the initial fighting of the Lebanese Civil War, but to defend themselves, Zahleh's leaders successfully trained a militia. After it intervened, Syria sent Special Forces into the city to win hearts and minds, and begin plots to gain control of the city, as it was near the Beirut-Damascus supply road. Both sides knew the battle was coming: Syrian forces occupied the high ground above the city, while Lebanese forces brought in reinforcements, and dug defensive trenches around the city.

### *Chapter 2 – Significance of the battle and description of the city*

The US intervened diplomatically to forestall a Syria-Israeli conflict even as it dealt with the Israeli-PLO conflict. Lebanese Christian forces were hoping for an Israeli military intervention on their side. Zahleh is strategically important, as it is the largest Christian city in Lebanon, and is near Syria's supply road, Syria's command post at Shtura, and the largest air base in Lebanon.

### *Chapter 3 – The fighting forces*

Lebanese forces consisted of about 200 regulars, plus a militia made up of citizens of the city. Ammunition was limited. About 20,000 Syrian troops, consisting of regular troops and Special Forces were deployed around Zahleh. Special forces occupied four buildings within the city at the beginning of the battle.

### *Chapter 4 – The operations concept and tactical plans*

Syrian goals consisted of securing the supply road, cutting off Zahleh's communications with Lebanese forces, and removing Lebanese forces from the city. To accomplish these goals, Syria planned to isolate the city, engage in artillery barrages, and use psychological operations. Lebanese goals consisted of protecting the city, and drawing Israeli intervention. To accomplish this, they intended to use the defensive lines, to hold the Syrian Special Forces in the city 'hostage', and to organize the entire city to resist the invaders.

### *Chapter 5 – The operations*

During the battle, Syrian forces spent a great deal of effort attacking Lebanese positions in the mountains, while inside the city itself, Lebanese forces tried to hold out in anticipation of Israeli intervention. Matters

escalated when Syria brought in helicopters, against Israel's wishes, but this did not lead to full-scale intervention, although the US did intervene diplomatically.

#### *Chapter 6 – Weapons and tactics*

The Syrians used tanks and artillery to terrorize the population, while Lebanese forces were forced to modify their own tactics, although they did use anti-tank weapons to great effect. Syrian command and control was poor, while Lebanese forces maintained contact with outside actors who might intervene, including the US.

The author goes into some depth on strategic and tactical psychological operations. Both sides had excellent intelligence, and used psychological operations to convince members of the other side not to fight. Lebanese forces in particular asked Syrian Christian soldiers why they were fighting their co-religionists, and not fighting for the Golan Heights.

#### *Chapter 7 – Results of the battle and findings*

The battle escalated the situation in Lebanon to the point where the US intervened, it forced Syria to review its tactics, and it highlighted the importance of psychological operations in urban battles. The Syrians used poor tactics, but eventually their superior firepower overwhelmed Lebanese forces, which were forced to withdraw.