

7 - Zahleh Battle

Chapter One

Brief summary

The Battle The Syrian forces operating with the Arab deterrence forces (Around twenty thousand), blockaded and isolated the city of Zahleh (Number of inhabitants including the refugees 120 thousands-150 thousands) in Al-Biqa' valley in Lebanon.

* Inside the city, there were two hundred Lebanese Christian Forces and around 2500-3000 fighters from the residents of Zahleh.

Syria claimed that the front garrison in Zahleh was considered a threat to the Syrian supply lines into Lebanon. The Christian Lebanese Forces claimed that Syria wanted to engulf this Christian city. Syria wanted to wipe out the Lebanese Forces and to dominate the city. The Lebanese Forces wanted to protect the city from Syrian domination, and create a situation whereby outside forces may intervene and change the current situation in Lebanon.

The Zahleh battle resulted in a tactical victory for the Syrian forces and a strategic victory for the Lebanese Forces. To conform to Syria's demands, elements of the Lebanese Forces were removed from the city, and demonstrations and the presence of armed Lebanese Forces on the streets were banned. The offices of the Lebanese Forces in Zahleh were closed

Importance of the Zahleh battle is:

- 1- Politically, it escalated the situation that led the American Forces to intervene in Lebanon.
- 2- Militarily, it forced Syria to review its fighting tactics
- 3- The importance of psychological warfare in urban battles during a siege.

The Weapons and Tactics

*The anti tank guns were the most valuable weapons in the hands of the defenders. The Syrian offensive forces heavily used cannons and anti aircraft guns during the attack.

*The short range of the anti tank guns limited its efficacy as anti tank weapons, but the Syrian Forces feared greatly the anti tank weapons. So all the Lebanese forces had to do was to display these guns in the open and the Syrian Forces would withdraw quickly.

*The Syrian tactics were not apparent in Zahleh. The armored vehicles were always progressing without infantry protection, even after destroying the combat vehicles by the anti tank weapons.

*After the Zahleh battle, the Syrian army started to use individual combat groups, because of the command and control problems they faced. Syrian Forces casualties were high due in part to friendly fire.

*The Syrian did not seem to have properly used the equipment they possessed and benefit from their capabilities. The Syrian forces did not fight during the night, despite the fact that their equipment was fit for night combat and could have gave them an edge.

*The Christian Lebanese Forces tactics depended on using light weapons and forcing the Syrian Forces to stay in the buildings in down town Zahlih under constant fire, instead of seizing the buildings where the Syrian Forces were.

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Command, Control, Communication, and Intelligence

The Arab Deterrent Forces (The Syrian forces) intercepted the Lebanese forces communications; at the same time the Lebanese forces did the same thing. In this kind of battles, it is normal for large armies to intercept wireless communications, so the Lebanese faked communications about false movements which mislead the Syrians. Both sides had excellent tactical and strategic intelligence.

The Psychological Warfare Operations

*The Lebanese forces dominated the strategic psychological warfare, which was directed towards the world's public opinion in order to put pressure on Syria. Both sides used this tactical psychological warfare, but the Lebanese forces employed more means and dominated the psychological war arena. The communications between the Lebanese forces and its command were good.

Any Syrian movement in the isolated city of Zahleh was immediately transmitted to the world to be interpreted as a hostile action against the Christian community.

The Zahleh battle was important in revealing the importance of psychological warfare in limited conflicts, and the capability of highly organized small groups to exploit this tool so long as they have good communications with the outside world.

* The blockade of any civilian community, even when isolated, can make headline news in world media as long as they possess telephone communication with the outside world.

Background

*The battle of Zahleh was a test of power between these two big forces in Lebanon, namely the Syrian army and the Christian Lebanese Forces. The battle of Zahleh initially consisted of a blockade of the city, followed by few attempts to proceed into the city while movements in the surrounding mountains during the battle were taking place. What kept Zahleh in good form was the effectiveness of the communications used by the Lebanese Forces and the political, military, and psychological mistakes committed by the Syrian forces.

*This background is to shed some light on the factors that led to the battle of Zahleh.

*Zahlih was not one of the factors that ignited the civil war (1975-1976) in Lebanon between the Palestinians and the Lebanese, and between the Lebanese themselves.

There was no violence around Zahlih during that period.

The only Palestinian presence in Al-Biqa' was camp Wafil near B'albak, and the Palestinians in that particular camp were only involved in maintaining their internal security, and therefore they did not pose any threat to any one. Zahlih was quiet.

*The escalation of incidents in the surrounding areas, such as kidnapping, threatening, had sectarian characteristics. This caused the residents of Zahleh to take defensive measures for fear of a change in the situation. In the Summer of 1975, a large number of Zahleh residents asked the Organization to train

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some of the city's youths (The organization is a quasi-government militia that supports the Christian interests). Sixty members were trained during that period. When the security incidents increased, the city leaders demanded the Organization to train more people, and they did train 600 more members in September of 1975.

*The six hundred members completed their training at the organization's camps in Kiserwan Mountains. After completing their training in the mountains they came back on foot to Zahleh. The road was 25 Kilometers long but it passed through rugged mountainous areas, and was used as a supply line for the Christians during the blockade of the city.

*The city leaders were happy with the training, and there was some of the trained people from among the phalanges militia in the city.

A team of trainers was brought from the organization for a period of three weeks in November-December 1975. The general plan to defend Zahlih began at that time. This plan is similar to Zahleh's defense plan in 1981.

The plan could not be executed immediately and took several years to implement.

*Zahleh remained outside the circle of the fighting in Lebanon. There were minor clashes between the city Christian residents and some Palestinian groups in the winter of 1976. All through the years there was a flux of Christian refugees from the other Al-Biqa' valley into the city

Syria started entering Lebanon in January, and increased its presence spring, which led to the Syrian intervention in the Lebanese crisis in June. This intervention was

welcomed by the Arab league, where the Syrian presence became known under the Arab deterrence forces. The Syrian presence prevented any outside party, including the Palesstinians, from using force against Zahleh.

*Since the beginning of the Syrian intervention in Lebanon, Syria moved into Zahleh in small units. These units were made of the Special Forces and the intelligence, they were moving in the city freely, they built good relationships with the city residents, they also gathered political information and other information and sent them to Damascus. The Syrian strategy towards Zahleh in the period after 1976 was concentrating on capturing “The minds and hearts” of the people through collaboration and not through force and oppression. Syria portrayed itself as the protector of Zahleh. It insinuated to the residents of Zahleh that the increase of Shi’ite numbers in the Biqa` valley as well as the build up of armed Palestinian fighters pose a threat to the Christians, and that they, the Syrians, are their best protectors.

*In early 1980 Syria started to perform a more effective role after the residents, and their love for resistance and their support for the for the Lebanese forces escalated. As a result Syria started to plant new cells for parties which supported Syria. These were: The Syrian National Socialist Party, and the Syrian Arab Ba’th Party. They started to establish leadership centers for them in the city. At the same time the National Lebanese Liberal Party started to support Syria instead of supporting the party’s leadership. These element were led by ‘Ilias Hanashih, all these elements were from outside the city of Zahleh, and rejected by the resistance in Zahleh. In addition to that, Syria used the clandestine violence (assassinations and blowing up) against the individuals and the stores in order to create a state of unrest, distrust and agitation, so that the inhabitants of Zahleh would forward a petition to the Syrian peace keeping forces to intervene in the city to part and disarm the opposed elements.

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During the period from 75-1980 the three Popes kept the spirit of the resistance in the city.

*The Lebanese forces had prior knowledge that Syria will not easily give up Zahleh because of its close location to the international Beirut-Damascus road, which was vital to protect the Syrian forces in Lebanon.

*The initial fight was limited at the end of 1980. ‘Ilias Hanashih group tried to take possession of The National Lebanese Liberal Party offices, and immediately the Christian Lebanese forces confronted them.....The fight between them lasted for several days, and during one of these clashes one Syrian armored soldier-transporting vehicles risked to enter the line of fire where the Lebanese forces hit it with an R.P.G. missile, which resulted in killing the five soldiers on board.

*The Syrians were busy collecting information about the parties involved in the fight and about the fight itself when the armored vehicle was hit, and when the Syrian forces tried to pull away the damaged armored vehicle along with the killed members, the Lebanese forces elements clashed with them, The Syrian forces and

Hanashih's group were bombarded with artillery. Ambushes were set for them when they occupied the mountainous areas overlooking Zahleh.

*These minor clashes at the end of December 1980 were not militarily significant, but they led to the battle, which later on took place, and brought to the surface the extent of tension in Zahleh and its surroundings. It made it clear for Syria that it was exposed to danger and how deep were the Lebanese forces were rooted in the city.

*The general situation in Lebanon played an important role in Zahleh's incidents. The Syrian leadership was pushing its supporter, Suleiman Franjeh, to win the presidency, which was scheduled to take place in September of 1982.

There were signs of support from Israel for Bashir Al-Jmayyil in sense that it would intervene if the Syrian forces would make a move, and because of the sensitivity in Al-Biqa' valley the Lebanese forces decided to continue to escalate the situation in Zahleh. Between the end of December 1980, when there were clashes and April 1981 when the battle took place, both the Lebanese and Syrian forces started to increase their numbers and preparedness for the battle that could not be avoided in the city.

In January and February 1981 the Lebanese forces sent Joe Eddeh, who played prominent roles in several previous clashes in the city, along with others for the sake of training the residents of Zahlih and to reorganize the city's defenses ...Starting March 10 the unrest became very obvious.

*The Syrians knew quickly about the presence of Lebanese forces trainers, and therefore the Syrian forces started to increase the reinforcements on the elevations surrounding the city. Meanwhile, the Lebanese forces did reinforce their equipments (especially a very extensive system of trenches) inside Zahlih and around it.

During the winter of 1981, both parties attacked each other on a temporary basis, such as attacking the side's bulldozer with R.P.G. or other anti tank weapons, which resulted in minor clashes.

A number of negotiations took place to resolve these small problems while both sides were buying time to prepare for the battle (This period was called the Bulldozers war). At the end of March the bulldozers became under the mercy of the tanks fires. After the killing of the Christian Lebanese forces commander, these forces moved the operations command post in Zahleh from Qadri Hotel to the Eastern university in the farthest point north west of the city. Later, the command post was moved to one of the banks in a safe area.

*The Lebanese forces dug approximately 1.5 kilometers of trenches at the beginning, and continued digging during the fight. After the struggle was settled, there were eight kilometers of trenches inside and around Zahlih.

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These trenches were reinforced, and had sand bags. There were shelters 50 meters apart. These trenches were ready in three months and went all the way to the hospital. (There were several phone calls from the Syrian forces to the Lebanese forces asking them to stop digging the trenches).

*The Lebanese forces improved the mountainous roads which connected Zahlih with Qa' Al-Rim and the Christian areas. The Syrian Forces objected openly against improving these mountainous roads, and went ahead and kidnapped the regional phalanges party leader as an act of revenge for these improvements.

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Chapter Two

The Significance of the Battle

The historical importance for the battle of Zahleh springs from the fact that as a result of the on going fighting in the mountains that surrounding the city, Syria brought ground-to-ground missiles into Lebanon which led the United States to intervene diplomatically.

The United States feared a Syrian-Israeli conflict.

The United States was exerting diplomatic pressures. The Palestinian resistance was shelling. The Israeli forces were retaliating with air strikes. This forced the American delegation to shift from resolving the ground to ground to handling the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The delegation succeeded in drawing a cease-fire agreement between the PLO and Israel.

The Syrian planners were very interested in controlling the main roads which pass through Zahlieh more than their interest in the build up of the Lebanese forces in the city. Also the members of the Lebanese forces were expecting that the struggle in Zahleh will cause an international interest in the crisis (especially Israel) which will lead it to get involved in the Lebanese crisis. At the end of the crisis and in the years following it, the Lebanese forces realized the extent of America's influence in Lebanon.

Description of the City

*Zahleh is one of the main cities in Lebanon, despite the fact that it is smaller than the main coastal cities, Beirut, Sidon, Tripoli, and Tyre. Number of population varies between one hundred thousand-110 thousands, but because of the influx of the Christian refugees from the neighboring areas, the population number became approximately 120-150 thousand at the time of the battle.

Zahleh is located amidst the high Lebanese mountains, and is located at the feet of the mountains and overlooking Al-Biqa' valley.

A number of factors make this city important:

- 1- The largest Christian city in terms of Christian population of Lebanon and the Middle East.

- 2- Is located only five kilometers from the Beirut-Damascus international road, and the main road in Lebanon North-South in the Easter region of Lebanon (This is the road that runs through Al-Biqa' valley)
- 3- Zahleh is located several kilometers from the Lebanese Al-Riyahq Air force base, which is the largest air force base in Lebanon.
- 4- The Syrian command post for Lebanon is located in Shtura, which is only five kilometers from Zahlih. See map number 1

*Zahlih's outskirts form an up side down letter T with line running parallel with the North-South road which is in fact Northeast-Southwest of this point (See map number 2).

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At the southwest end of Zahlih lies the area of Hosh Al-'Amara , and at the north east end lies the Ma'alajat area at the end of the letter T which extends to the highest of the heights parallel to Bardoni river that crosses Hush Al-'Amara-Ma'lajat area when it crosses the road.

*West of Zahlih there is a Shi'at area (Most of Al-Biqa' is Shi'at)- on the other side of the south-north road there is the industrial area, where many different industries are. Most of Zahleh's buildings are small and low in height; the average is between two to three floors. All its streets are relatively narrow. The dominant buildings and sights in the city are as follows:

- Northwest: The east college- the monasteries- the prison- the technical college.
- Northeast: The Casino- The Lycee (The French high school).
- West: Tal Shiha- The hospitals- Al-Kubri.
- East: The electric power company- Al-Harim "Sarai Al-Sultan".
- South: The rail road station- Al-Majzar

*The elevated points around the North-South road are, Tal Shiha (1041 meters), Tal Himar, both of them are overlooking the road. When traveling north or northwest by the side of Braduni River the elevation increases rapidly.

*Three kilometers away from Qa'r Al-Rim the elevations are more than 1800 meters high.

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Chapter Three

The Fighting Forces

The Lebanese forces:

*The defending forces have limited sources of individuals and equipment; 200 combatants from the Lebanese forces descended on the city in April 12, in addition to three thousand armed individuals from the city.

*Thirty members of the two hundred of the Lebanese forces were stationed along the north-south road. They had six R.P.G. launchers. Another group of thirty combatants were stationed on the heights.

All the citizens participated in combat and the defense of the city in the capacity of collaborators or helpers. The citizens who did not desire to participate in combat were given other jobs, such as baking bread.

Some groups of citizens prepared food for the defenders, carried the mail, assumed cleaning jobs and repaired equipment.

*There were between 60-100 members of the internal police, who were helping in defending in the last stage of the battle.

*The defenders had in position the following weapons:

-106 mm cannons, 85 mm cannons (B 10) recoilless.

-R.P.G. launchers.

-82 mm, 81 mm, 120 mm, and 4.2 inch (107 mm) Mortars.

- Half-inch machine guns BROWNING.

-Milan missiles (Were brought just before closing the North-South road).

-M 16 guns, Kalashnikov and old Sten guns.

-Mines, hand grenades (Smoke, and defensive).

-There were no ammunitions for the half-inch machine guns or B 12

Due to the limited availability of ammunition, the defenders did not have the desire to use the mortars. They initially depended on the help of the outside artillery which was used by the Lebanese forces from their positions in the mountains near Zahlih and from the 130, 155 mm cannons.

These sites hit with the maximum range on the Syrian forces located on the heights around the city.

Shortage of ammunitions was accompanied with restrictions on the usage of food and medicine.

The Syrian army

Prior to the fight the Syrian forces were deployed only around Zahlih at distance of few kilometers away from the strongest Syrian locations in Lebanon in the city of Shtura. These forces consisted of 2 Special Forces battalions (Commandos) + an armored vehicles battalion.

Before the battle, the Syrian forces were heavily concentrated in Shtura (Southwest of Zahlih) and on Beirut-Damascus international road in locations northeast of the city.

*After January 1981, the Syrians increased their forces because of the escalating tension and after April they further increased their forces because of the battle. In mid April more new forces were added: Five other Special Forces battalions+ an additional armored vehicles battalions+ Missiles battalion.

*The Syrian armored vehicles initially consisted of T54/55 and some T62 tanks.

The Syrian air force was available in small number. The Syrians controlled Al-Riyahq Lebanese air force base, located at five kilometers from the city. There were some Syrian jet fighters in this base.

*During the battle, there were several Syrian army units. Around twenty thousand troops were deployed in an area of 10 to 20 kilometers around Zahleh. These units were as follows:

The unit	Location
Brigade 35 Special Forces Brigade 41 Special Forces Brigade 47 Mechanical Infantry	Dhahr-Zahlih-Hush Al-‘Amara-The industrial zone Qasara-Around Al-Lisi (The French High School) Shtura
Brigade 51 the independent armored	Karak- Ablah- Nabi- Riyak
Brigade 62 Mechanical Infantry	Dhahr Al-Baydar
Brigade 67	On the Border with Syria- Southwest the Industrial zone

There were around 100 members of the Syrian Special Forces inside Zahleh initially in two buildings downtown. The Syrians initially were in several buildings but they moved to only two buildings. Half of them were in one building in downtown Zahleh near the main road bridge, and the other half near the Post, Telephone, and Telegraph building.

* The Syrians stationed a number of Russian combat vehicles type PMP at strategic locations.

The Syrian forces occupied some of the heights surrounding the city, and had established tanks and infantry posts in some of these places early in the game. (Like The Virgin Mary tower which stands 50 meters high above the hospital and overlooks all of Zahleh).

*In addition to tanks, armored vehicles and helicopters, the Syrian forces had 160, 240 mm mortars, missile launchers PM-14, PM-21. The Syrian forces also used the Dragonov gun 7.62 mm as snipers’ gun.

*A large scale attack on the city would have exposed Syria’s hostile intentions in the Arab world and their use of air forces was prohibited due to a secret agreement between

them and Israel which spelled out the rules of engagement the Syrians can use as peacekeeping forces in Lebanon.

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Chapter Four

The Operations Concept/ The Syrian forces

*The Syrian's goal was to avoid fighting inside the city by any means possible, because it would have increased their losses, and increased the level of close encounters with the residents.

At the same time the Syrians aimed at controlling the main road North-South, that ran through Zahleh , (and it is the same road that runs North-South through Al-Biqa' valley), and also isolating and destroying the positions of the Lebanese forces inside the city.

The military goals that could be gained by destroying these positions were:

- 1-To create a strong strict command along the North-South road, and this includes destroying any sites, hostile or may turn to become hostile.
- 2-To stop communications between the city and the Lebanese forces stationed on the outskirts.
- 3- To drive the Lebanese forces out of Zahleh by defeating them militarily. This would weaken them and place Syria in a controlling position.

The Operation Concept/ The Lebanese Forces

The city residents did not want their homes destroyed. The Lebanese forces preferred to set the city's first line of defense outside of the city, or in the suburbs, in spite of this, most of the defenders were among the city's untrained citizens, or with little of training but had the determination to defend their homes, so it was difficult to defend from outside the city or from the suburbs. The principal responsibility to stop the Syrian offense lied with the people on the periphery and the outskirts of the city. As a result there were so many trenches dug around the city's suburbs. A light brigade of citizens was kept inside Zahleh to be called upon when necessary.

A civil defense force was formed responsible for various services, such as extinguishing fires and distributing medications. It was responsible for different services like putting out fires and medicine distribution.

A civil defense force was formed to handle services such as extinguishing fires and distributing medications.

The defenders believed that if telephone communications with the outside world and vehement determined defense, were available, the struggle around Zahlih would take one of two paths- Victory (It is that Syria, will stop hoping to overtake the city) or an Israeli intervention- But on April 8 the Israeli commanders informed President Bashir al-Jmayel of their decision not to intervene except in special cases...but the idea of an Israeli intervention stuck with defenders throughout the time of siege.

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The Tactical Plan/ The Syrian Forces

*The Syrian's initial resolution of the Zahleh issue was at first limited to controlling the North-South road, which no party objected to.

The Christian Lebanese forces controlled the bridge over The Barduni river. On April 1st, they continuously fired on the Syrian forces stationed along the road which meant that the Syrian method does not work, and that to attack the city with additional forces, which will be costly for the Syrian forces.

*A more extensive Syrian plan was put in place:

First: To isolate the city of Zahleh and the surrounding areas and cut off the support they were receiving.

Second: To isolate the strong outlying locations like (The industrial zone, Qa'r Al-Rim).

Third: To put pressure on the city to surrender by barraging it with gunfire from the high areas surrounding the city, and by using psychological pressure.

The Tactical Plan/ The Lebanese Forces

The defense was based on heavily fortified sites on the outskirts of the city and check observation points were set up next to the mountains, which were connected with rugged paths and supplied by the Lebanese Forces.

The second circle constituted of locations along the outer city limits- these locations were connected with trenches or other means of communications, so that the Lebanese forces commander Joe Eddeh could coordinate all movements. And finally, the inner city positions relied on the internal popular support.

Despite the fact that it was preferred to have the entire defense outside the city to rescue it, but this was not suitable for the following reasons:

1-The permanent defense in the mountains will be affected because of the bad weather in the mountains, which will isolate the defenders from the supply lines, from movement, and from moving the heavy weapons.

2-The fight will turn into an artillery battle. The local forces did not have heavy weapons, the only thing they had was some artillery support from the Christian forces.

3-The inhabitants of Zahleh were not army personnel but were civilians who fought for their homes, we are not to expect from them to perform military operations in the mountainous areas.

*Zahleh's defense plan divided the area in four sectors, as follows:

1-The mountains: Qa'r Al-Rim- Wadi Al-'Aryish- The mountains.

2-The west: Rasyih- Mar Ilyas-Tal Shiha.

3-The East: Maydan- Hush Al-Za'ranih- Birbira- J'ar.

4- The South: Hush Al-'Amara- Ma'laja- The industrial zone.

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*Qa'r Al-Rim is a village about three kilometers to the northwest of Zahlih itself. Wadi Al-'Aryish is located to the northwest on the northwest outskirts of Zahlih.

*Each sector inside the city itself (The southern sector) is formed of a quarter, and as a result, there are boundaries among the quarters.

The industrial zone is a Syrian location, but each sector of the three sectors had its own independent residents, which made it easier to choose leaders for the sectors, because a family or more, from the traditional families, governs each sector. These families were given the function of leadership within their sectors to avoid arguments about the leadership.

There were 6-8 defense posts in each sector.

Zahleh's residents realized that they could not break the blockade imposed on the city, because the city was isolated from the main Christian fortresses, and realized that the presence of the Syrian troops in the city is to their benefit because they became hostages in the hands of the residents of Zahlih.

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Chapter Five

The Operations

*The Syrian forces demanded an extra 2 building to be handed to them in addition to the two building they had, but Zahleh's leaders refused.

In April the Christian Lebanese forces attacked the Syrian units approaching the bridge that crossed the Barduni River near Zahleh. Despite the preparation that the Syrians saw, yet they did not face any resistance in Zahleh. However, the element of surprise was a decisive factor against the Syrians, which led to great losses among them, and the Lebanese forces took control of the bridge. The Syrians lost two buildings which were destroyed by fires from the small streets. In line with their usual tactic, the Syrians carried out several attacks but they failed to take control of the bridge. These incidents led to the city's blockade.

*The Syrian forces heavily bombarded the city by using artillery on April 1st and 2nd with the purpose of destroying the support provided to the resistance by the people and bring to the surface the high price that the citizens will be paying for this support. The Lebanese forces fortified themselves in because it was involved with its defense, and established good rapport with the local leadership. The idea of Zahleh as a Christian city under siege, and the large numbers of Syrian forces approaching the city woke up the resistance. From this point the two parties escalated the fight.

*The Syrian forces were present inside four buildings in the city before the fight started, three of those buildings were taken over. Two were taken at the early stage by the Lebanese forces and the third later on. As a result of the artillery bombardment by the Syrian forces, the Lebanese forces left the Syrian forces in the fourth building. The Syrians remained in the building during the battle; they were hostages in the Lebanese forces' hands. This threat to the Syrian forces was the reason for the Syrian lull because the Syrian forces in this building wanted to restore the food, water, and medical supplies. This lull gave the fighters a break and opened negotiations with the Syrians to allow the Red Cross and other parties to enter the city.

The Syrian response to the battle was preparing sites for Sam 6 missiles around the end of March. They made the sites ready quickly but they were not used. Another response came in April, when they asked the Lebanese forces to surrender their positions to the Syrian forces, and that they would lift the siege if all the Lebanese Forces fighters would leave the city.

But the Christian response consisted of clandestine meetings with the Israeli officials and asking them to intervene.

* The main roads leading to Zahleh were under the Syrian forces control; they have been blocked against any reinforcement for the Lebanese forces. The mountainous roads remained open until the Syrians took control of the mountains, and completely isolated the city on April 13-14. The Lebanese forces decided to resist for the following reasons:

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- 1- Zahleh was deemed as a unifying symbol of all Christians.
- 2- It is a good cause to mobilize the Lebanese people and the world's Christian public opinion.
3. That the resistance may lead the United States to enter Lebanon or at least to oppose Syria.

4- The battle may drag Israel to intervene.

*The Lebanese forces equipped three companies- two commandoes and one infantry. These companies constituted of 200 fighters; they had 40 Milan missiles and several R.P.G. launchers. These units were under the command of the best Lebanese forces officers, namely, Dr. Ilyas Zayik and Joe Eddeh. These companies arrived in Zahleh before the mountainous roads were blocked by the Syrians.

*After April 13-14 when the last mountainous road was blocked, the city blockade started. The road blocking battle required the Syrian forces to occupy the Lebanese forces sites in close by mountains- especially Mount Sanin- These battles did not take place in inhabited areas. We will not discuss it here, but some understanding for it has a benefit for the sake of collecting all the incidents together.

*The Syrian operations against the Lebanese forces sites started at the same time Zahleh and Beirut were being bombarded. The battle in the mountains had greater military scopes because the military victory places the Syrian forces on higher grounds, and they are the highest grounds in Lebanon in particular the Frenchman's room on top of Mount Sanin. Syria controlled from the beginning most of these heights, but the Mount Sanin – Zahlih area was under the Lebanese forces control. The Syrian forces control of Mount Sanin will ensure the isolation of the Lebanese forces, and cut off their sources of supplies. The last route was cut off on April 13-14 by blocking the road.

* The Syrian forces advanced to the mountains sites after they seized the main roads leading into and out of Zahleh on April 1st.

*The initial move consisted of artillery shelling. The battle started on April 7th and both sides exchanged heavy artillery shelling. The next day heavy reinforcements were brought in. On April 10th, it became obvious that Syria was carrying out a large scale attack against the Lebanese forces in the mountains. Simultaneously, the Syrians brought commando units to the battlefield by helicopters. The Syrians were so involved in the mountains that there was no longer bombardment of Zahlih.

*The Syrian attack lasted for a week in the mountains. The Lebanese forces under the command of Joe Eddeh were sent back back to Zahlih.

The clandestine communications with Israel started. In a meeting with David Kimshi on April 8, Bashir Al-Jmayyil, commander of the Lebanese forces, was told that his forces should hold their ground and that Israel did not have the intention for direct intervention. He was also told that the Israeli air force will intervene if the Syrian forces intervened. Meanwhile, in November, Israel continued to supply the Lebanese forces with their needs and continued to apply diplomatic pressure to force Syria to depart from Lebanon.

* The Syrians used the helicopters in the mountains to transport forces and supplies. Often, they used to fire from the helicopters against the Lebanese forces sites, which did not have the means to fire back at them.

*The morale started ebbing after the spread of the news about the utilization of combat helicopters in the battle (Helicopters were type MA 8 and Jazil [PH]) and the conditions of the Christian sites deteriorated in Zahleh due to escalation of blockade pressures. There were so many inquiries within the Christian society (In Zahleh and Beirut) about the Israeli intentions and why the Israeli army did not intervene to help the Lebanese forces in Zahleh.

*The Israeli Intelligence said that it was not wise to intervene, and analyzed the condition in Zahleh as a ploy by the Lebanese forces to drag Israel into the conflict.. The Israeli Musad was split regarding its relationship with the Lebanese forces; and on April 28 the Israeli cabinet decided to carry out a limited air strike.

*When the mountain battle ended, and on April 28, the Israeli air force finally directed a hit and destroyed 2 Syrian helicopters.. This was a limited warning to Syria not to use the helicopters in their attacks (There was a treaty signed between Syria and Israel with the help of the United States in 1976 whereby Israel agrees to the Syrian presence in Lebanon under the umbrella of the Arab deterrence forces, but geographical and practical restrictions were imposed on the Syrian forces operations. Among the restrictions was a ban placed on Syrian air force from operating or fighting in Lebanon and not to operate the M/T missile batteries. The helicopter operations were not discussed. The two parties did not talk about the helicopters in the 1976 treaty. The Syrians responded by moving Sam 6 missiles to the previously prepared sites.

*Bringing Sam 6 missiles into Lebanon caused an international crisis, and Israel and Syria were on the verge of a war. The government of Israel demanded the removal of the missiles. America sent Philip Habib to the region. His negotiations lasted for several months and resulted in imposing a ceasefire period in Lebanon, but the missiles remained.

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Chapter Six

Weapons and tactics

First: The Weapons:

The Air Force: Though Syria used the helicopter; nevertheless the helicopter played a very insignificant role in the battle of Zahleh. The helicopters were used to transport soldiers to the battlefield on the surrounding mountains and clashed with Lebanese forces on the mountains. The other Syrian jet fighters were used to threaten through air maneuvers.

The forces that were air dropped from the helicopters facilitated the control of the surrounding heights, and stopping the supplies for Zahleh. Syria was able to occupy the heights with the use of the helicopters.

The Armored Vehicles: The tanks' artillery were the most effective weapon used in providing barriers in Zahlih, at a time when infantry was non-existent. The armored vehicles were an obvious target for the antitank weapons in Zahleh. Too many Tanks were destroyed and impaired by the R.P.G. or the Milan. Despite that, the Syrian forces used the armored vehicles efficiently against the buildings and the outskirt sites.

The psychological horror from the tanks was also one of the important factors. The Syrian commanders sent the tank for the purpose of terrorizing, and lowering the morale of the citizens. Many young men with little training were threatened by the appearance of weapons like the tanks that they could not fight against them

*The Syrians used the BMB vehicles in Zahleh- The vehicle's tower is round, 360 degrees, moves in all directions, its speed is exceptional. The troops transporters were not of help to the Syrians, because they were easy targets, and easy to be transpierced by the antitank weapons especially the R.P.G. The individuals inside such vehicles were subject to severe injuries.

The Artillery: The Syrian artillery preceded any attempt of Syrian forces to

go forward, and as a result the Lebanese forces considered the shelling as a prelude for the advancing Syrian tanks towards the city.

The artillery started firing usually at seven o'clock in the evening and continued till four o'clock in the morning. Half an hour later, that is at 4.30, the Syrian tanks would commence their attack.

In general the artillery caused a number of losses among the Lebanese forces.

The artillery fire had more of a tactical effect than a strategic one.

Antiaircraft artillery was used against the building and proved that it has a destructive effect especially in the recently constructed buildings. Even the old buildings suffered many damages. The Syrians used antiaircraft artillery from the top floors of buildings to plant horror, which proved to be an effective tactic because of the heavy intensity of the shellings.

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The Mines

The mines were used by the Syrian forces on the roads from Qa' Al-Rim to cut off transportation between Qa' Al-Rim and Zahleh. Their effect was not perfect. But they caused some fear among the members of the Lebanese forces, because they did not have the equipment to remove the mines. The Lebanese forces used the mines ineffectively.

Anti tank weapons

*Both sides used the R.P.G. heavily. The Lebanese forces used the R.P.G against Syrian tanks and armored vehicles. The weapon was found to be effective but unable to penetrate the tanks if fired with an angle less than 90 degrees, unless if the tower was hit from above, or the chain too a direct hit. (To disable the chain). The R.P.G. was very

effective against the armored troops transporters because the armored sides are thin. The main problem that confronted the Lebanese forces dealing with R.P.G. is the minimum distance that the R.P.G. could be used at, which is twenty meters; as a result, you cannot fight in a distance of twenty meters. In view of this, many shots had to be taken, because there was one direct hit for every twenty fired.

The Syrian forces used the R.P.G. against the strongholds and buildings. The wire guided missiles, "Milutika", were used against the buildings. The R.P.G. proved to have limited impact against the buildings, but was effective against strongholds in the mountains.

The Milan was very effective in the early destruction of the Syrian tanks. The Milan put horror among the Syrians. Moving the Milan to the threatened sectors inside Zahleh scared the Syrians; therefore they withdrew their tanks in haste.

Second: The tactics:

The Syrian army's tactics in the battle around Sidon were not admirable. The tanks, or the tanks along with the armored vehicles advanced in threes, one next to the other. Individuals were sitting very tight in the vehicles.

*The tanks did not enter the constructed areas which were protected by the infantry. Outside the city there were five soldiers on foot accompanying each tank. The tanks entered the built areas leaving the infantry soldiers that were supposed to protect them behind, and entered alone.

*In most of the attacks there were two or three tanks going forward, followed by nine tanks, three tanks in a row.

*The Syrians did not benefit from the darkness much, despite the fact that they possessed night vision equipment. Some of the attacks took place either very late at night or before the break of dawn.

The Syrian stormed the strongholds, especially the Special Forces (The commandoes) by mostly using R.P.G.'s which they fired alternatively, i.e. five shells at one time from two different groups.

Shelling with R.P.G. caused confusion and defeat to the defenders.

The Syrian snipers tactics were different from the snipers of the Lebanese forces.

The Syrian snipers always preferred the higher floors because the Lebanese forces

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did not possess artillery to threaten them. Also the Syrian anti-aircraft artillery was used from higher floors, as a terrorizing weapon in addition to the great destruction, the noise and the echo of the heavy weapons shells was scary.

* The snipers used the Dragonv gun with great efficiency.

The Lebanese forces attacks on the buildings did not comply with their combat ideology which dictates that the best way to attack the buildings is starting from the top and going

down. The Zahleh battle circumstances prevented them from executing this. The Lebanese forces attacked the buildings starting from the bottom up. In these cases four or five men attacked the building and immediately the Syrian defenders inside the building moved up. (The Syrians occupied the tallest building in town). They were not in the mood to defend these buildings, but as soon as the firing started on them, they would ask for support.

*The Lebanese snipers stayed in the lower floors to minimize their exposure to artillery fires. The snipers caused the Syrian forces in Zahlih to stay put, as there were no attacks against these locations.

*The Lebanese forces used smoke grenades, to cover-up their movements, and planted false traps. The usage of the smoke grenades was a marginal tactic during the combat because the Lebanese forces did not have except fifty such grenades.

Leadership, Control, Communications, and Intelligence

*The wireless communication devices that were in the possession of the Lebanese forces were PRC25. Around four devices were VRC46, a device mounted on a vehicle, (which were essentially used to intercept the Syrian communications), small hand-held devices, field telephones, and city phones and messengers.

The most important method of communication was the human voice; individuals yelling to each other.

PRC25 device faced difficulties in the buildings, when used in the city. The Lebanese forces had voice changing devices that were installed on the phones and the wireless devices, so that if the enemy intercepted, they could not hear except humming noises.

*Most communications took into consideration the security factor.

*The defender's communications depended on phone and land communications. The land communications became difficult to use after April 13, but the phone communications continued throughout the battle. Some of the city phones went out of order, but the service for the city, and from it to the Lebanese command continued. The phones were used for internal communications in the city covering tactical movements, and also to direct the fires. The Lebanese forces command operations room contacted the local defending sectors in Zahleh directly.

They also used the phones for contacting the outside world. Communications with France and the United States were important to put pressure on Syria. The citizens of Zahleh talked to the White House and to the American vice president. [George Bush was the president at that time.]

*The location of the leadership and command of the Syrian army could not be identified. The Syrian high command was located in the Syrian intelligence center near Shtura. It was obvious that leadership, control

and communications could not deal effectively with the battle because of their distant location from the battlefield; however they were determined that their orders be carried out.

* The Syrian forces were equipped with the wireless device PRC77 and other similar devices.

The Syrian army always prefers land communications for security purposes. Resorting to wireless communication was common in Zahleh. It was obvious for the defenders that the Syrian forces use the waves because the Lebanese forces mentioned that they were listening to the Syrian forces on all channels.

*Both sides intercepted each others calls. Interception was not secret, for both sides talked to each other via the wireless and the phone. The Syrian tanks crews were very concerned and worried because of Milan missiles, and as a result the Lebanese forces talked using the wireless communications about the movement of the Milan to certain sectors under the Syrian pressure. In many cases the Syrians withdrew their tanks.

* Both sides had good intelligence. Since the beginning of the Syrian invasion of Lebanon in 1976, Syria saw that its role was very political, and as a result gave more priority to the intelligence service. Shtura center was run by the Syrian intelligence service. The operations were around Zahleh. The coordination for them was done by the intelligence service and not by the fighting units. All negotiations were carried out by the Syrian Intelligence officers.

* The Syrians had a good idea about the nature and the size of the forces they are facing in Zahleh but underestimated the resolve of the Lebanese forces and the local people. The Lebanese forces also had good information about the Syrian forces movements. They knew the locations, the equipments, the movements; they had good information about the capabilities of the important units. They used this information in their psychological warfare.

Medical affairs

The medical arrangements for the defenders were limited, because there were only 2 hospitals in Zahleh. One of them is very close to the front, which was not dependable. The hospitals were in Ma'laqa and Tal Shiha. The Ma'laqa hospital was the scene of many operations; it could not be depended upon for medical support because the doctors and the medical teams were part of the fighters.

*Two clinics were used. The Lebanese forces established a (field hospital) in one of the buildings and a principal field hospital in the underground floor of Qadri hotel. The hotel hospital was three floors underground.

The medical supplies in the clinics were not sufficient, and they were under the continuous Syrian bombardment- the major surgical operations were done by the city's doctors- there was no evacuation system for the seriously wounded from the city, nevertheless the Red Cross was allowed to go in several times in order to evacuate the wounded ones.

*The means by which the wounded were to be transported had to wait until dark during the battle peak regardless of how serious is the injury.

*It is thought that the minor wound were about two and a half time more common than the severe ones among the Lebanese forces. The tank shells caused most injuries, to be followed by the artillery and the snipers.

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About the Syrians, it is thought that the Lebanese forces artillery caused most of the losses in the Syrian forces. Little is known about the Syrian medical affairs.

The Psychological Warfare Operations

* The Syrian forces used the loudspeakers and the wireless devices to influence the people, and the Lebanese forces behavior. The Syrian forces asked the city inhabitants to leave. This step was to reduce the casualties among civilians, in addition to interrupting the phone, water and electric power services intermittently as a mean of pressure on the defending people.

*The psychological warfare was directed to the outside world through four main channels (foreign newspapers, radio, TV and organized special interest groups) as well as via the Lebanese forces communications offices.

Inside Lebanon the psychological warfare division in the Lebanese forces command in Beirut operated the strategic psychological warfare activities.

The Strategic Psychological Warfare

* There were four targets to which the strategic psychological warfare was directed The Christian Lebanese and others, Israel, the West (especially the United States) and Syria.

*Propaganda and directed information to Christian society in Lebanon had driving nature targeting unifying and supporting the resistance against the Syrians in Zahleh and Beirut (In Beirut, especially in Al-Ashrafiyeh and East Beirut in general, since it was under limited siege during the same period)

*The propaganda that was directed towards Israel aimed at showing that there was a threat to the life of the Christian society, which Israel took upon itself to protect.

* The propaganda that was directed to the West was religious, humanitarian in nature; it focused on shedding of the Christian blood.

*The propaganda that was directed towards Syria, was trying to calm Syria lest it wages an unlimited war.

The psychological warfare division of the Lebanese forces printed cards to call on the Christian to unite in the face of Syria, and for the Christians to think about the Christian identity and cancel any allegiance or relationships, which would direct them away from this identity. Zahleh was known by the name of "Al-Biqa' bride" It was printed on a card, represented by a beautiful woman dressed in white gown "wedding

dress” holding in her hand a bullet under the form of the Lebanese flag getting out of the famous Wadi Al-‘Arayis hotel in Zahlih. In large print, the word “Zahleh” was written.

It was not possible to mobilize other Lebanese societies; the Lebanese forces felt the need to keep the neutrality of the other non-Christian societies near Zahlrh, and this meant the Shi’ites who controlled Al-Biqa’ valley.

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A month prior to the start of the Zahleh incidents, there was a clash with a Patrol car in the city of B’albak, the largest city in Al-Biqa’ valley, The injured Shi’ites were treated in the hospitals of Zahleh. When the fight started in Zahlih, the Lebanese forces transmitted messages to B’albak requesting help against the Syrians, who wanted to spread their control over Lebanon. Thanks were sent to the men of B’albak for their efforts in defending Al-Biqa’. They meant the clashes that took place a month earlier, when Shi’ites sent an ambulance carrying blood for the wounded in Zahlehe and the Syrian forces hit it, which resulted in killing the driver and the doctor-.The Lebanese forces thanked the citizens of B’albak and paid their condolences to the two victims. They said that the incident which lead to the loss of Shi’it e blood was sacrificed for defending the Lebanese Biqa’.

The Tactical Psychological Warfare

*The Lebanese forces tactical psychological warfare was totally directed against the Syrian forces.

*Individuals of the Lebanese forces used the loudspeakers to talk to the Syrian forces; they also used the radio, TV, flyers and the combat operations.

*It is possible that the primary techniques to communicate with the Syrians was to penetrate their radio frequencies. They had good intelligence information the names of the Syrian Christian officers. The Lebanese forces talked to them by name and asked them, why they fight against their Christian brothers. The Lebanese forces talked to the non-Christians in the Syrian army and asked them why they die in Lebanon and in Zahleh, and why they are not in the Golan heights to fight the enemy of Syria.

*Another technique of the psychological warfare was using the Syrian interception, because the Syrians were listening to the Lebanese forces conversations, and therefore the latter transmitted messages about the Milan crews movements to specific sectors, so that the Syrians would withdraw their tanks.

*As a response to the Syrian determination to openly launch a tank attack, the Lebanese artillery bombed Shtura, which was the Syrian intelligence center in Lebanon. The success of this shelling caused the Syrians to stop their attack.

The Syrian tactical psychological warfare was a large part of many military operations in Zahleh. The siege of Zahleh was one way to fulfill the Syrian objectives, and at the same time to avoid inflicting heavy casualties among the civilians. The Syrian movements were often carried out to frighten citizens and not to change the military position.

The Syrian forces communication jam against the Lebanese forces was aimed at terrorizing the Lebanese forces, and the artillery shelling was aimed at threatening the residents and the fighters.

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Chapter seven

The Innovations

*One of the Lebanese forces groups set up a tricky trap by placing explosive powder in a light bulb and made it to explode by turning on the wall switch.

*The Lebanese forces used the large water cistern to flood some areas to prevent the passage of the tanks.

*On three or four occasions, the Lebanese forces succeeded in blowing up Oxygen/Hydrogen containers directly in front of the tanks. This technique worked well by either damaging the tank or terrifying the tank crew, enough to stop the tank.

The result of the battle

*The result of the battle was a tactical victory for the Syrians and a strategic victory for the Lebanese forces, considering Syria's request to kick the Lebanese forces fighters from Zahleh and banning the general demonstrations or the appearance of armed people. The Lebanese forces offices were closed in Zahleh after that.

The Syrian missiles remained in Al-Biqa' valley and they retained the new mountain sites they which they occupied around Zahleh.

The Israeli plan to attack the Syrian missiles was canceled on April 30 because of the element weather. The trip of Philip Habib annulled carrying out the attack after that.

The findings

The weapons and the tactics

* The antitank weapons were the best weapons used by the defender. The Syrian forces heavily used the antiaircraft artillery. The minimum distance that the antitank

weapons could be used within was 20 (R.P.G.) limited the effectiveness of the antitank weapons. The Syrian army was extremely terrified in an obvious way from the antitank weapons.

*The good Syrian tactics were not apparent in Zahleh. The tanks were always going forth to the city without the infantry protection even after the antitank weapons destroyed the armored vehicles

*After Zahleh's battles, the Syrian forces started using independent combat groups because of the leadership and control problems they faced in Zahleh. The Syrians failed to take advantage of the equipments in their possessions to the maxim; for example, the Syrians did not fight at

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night, despite the availability of the night vision equipments, which gave them many advantages over their enemy who does not possess them.

The Lebanese tactics were overcome because of the superiority of the Syrian fire power and the desire to keep the Syrian forces inside the buildings in downtown Zahleh instead of seizing them.

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