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Hezbollah under Pressure

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Weekly Standard

October 23, 2012

Hezbollah's days of dominating Lebanon are likely numbered, and the militia's recent behavior suggests that it sees the writing on the wall.

To many Lebanese, the massive car bomb attack in Beirut on Friday that killed the Sunni Muslim head of internal security Wissam al Hassan and seven others evoked the 2005 assassination of former Lebanese premier Rafik Hariri. Members of the Shiite militia Hezbollah were indicted for the 2005 crime, and the organization -- along with Syrian president Bashar al-Assad's regime -- is a leading suspect in this latest outrage. Rather than a demonstration of strength, however, the attack highlights the militia's sense of insecurity.

For much of the past decade, Hezbollah has struck a cocky pose. But twenty months into a popular uprising in Syria that threatens to topple the Assad regime, interrupt Hezbollah supply lines, and leave the Shiite Party of God surrounded by a sea of Sunni Muslims, the organization is under unprecedented pressure and its normally confident leader Hassan Nasrallah seems concerned. While his speeches continue to reflect their perennial bravado, in recent appearances Nasrallah clearly isn't looking himself.

Most striking, the once-svelte, turbaned cleric has ballooned into corpulence. Perhaps the bunker lifestyle with its attendant lack of exercise is catching up with the aging sheikh. Or maybe Nasrallah is stress eating. Regardless, images of the now rotund, almost cherubic Hezbollah leader laboriously ascending the podium in September to deliver a fiery "death to America, death to Israel" speech (posted on the organization's Intiqad electronic magazine website) do not inspire the same level of terror as before.

Today, while the demise of Hezbollah is far from imminent, regional developments threaten to undermine the group's preeminent position in Lebanon. And the militia has responded by lashing out against (and perhaps killing its) local detractors, highlighting its anti-Israel agenda, and doubling down on Assad. Given the current stresses, it is difficult to predict

how this normally disciplined and calculating organization will behave.

Late September in the West Beirut offices of the Union for Lebanese Journalists, a handful of anti-Hezbollah Shiites and reporters held a press conference. The panelists -- and several other like-minded Shiites -- had lately come under fire by the anti-American, pro-Hezbollah daily *Al-Akhbar* for their vocal opposition to the militia, a position documented in secret U.S. diplomatic cables published by Wikileaks. While careful to praise Hezbollah "resistance" operations against Israel, the speakers complained bitterly about the Iranian- and Syrian-backed organization's attempt to enforce ideological hegemony on its Lebanese co-religionists via a campaign in *Al-Akhbar* -- replete with threats of violence -- against the so-called "Shiites of the [American] Embassy."

The *Al-Akhbar* campaign isn't the first time Hezbollah has tried to intimidate dissident Shiites into quiescence. The militia, which holds a near political monopoly over Lebanon's Shiite constituency, has for decades quietly threatened those in the community who deviated from the orthodoxy to question the legitimacy of the group's arsenal and subservience to the clerical regime in Tehran. (In recent months, the paper had also attacked Wissam al-Hassan for his anti-Assad regime stance). But this orchestrated media campaign against Shiites seemed extreme, even by Hezbollah standards.

To be sure, the *Al-Akhbar* series is menacing, yet it also suggests a sense of desperation. It's no secret that Hezbollah has been struggling since the start of the Syrian rebellion. After backing revolts against authoritarian governments in Tunisia, Libya, Egypt, and Bahrain, the self-described "Organization of the Oppressed" found itself in the uncomfortable position of justifying atrocities perpetrated by the despotic Assad regime in Syria. Worse, as the now steady stream of funerals for Hezbollah fighters seemingly confirms, the militia has been deploying troops next door to bolster Assad's forces.

Rumors of quiet burials of Hezbollah martyrs in south Lebanon have been circulating for months, especially since May when eleven Shiite "pilgrims" were kidnapped in Syria, reportedly including Ali Safa, the nephew of the organization's leader, Hassan Nasrallah. But Hezbollah only admitted its presence in Syria last week, after a prominent military commander responsible for the Bekaa was killed. Nasrallah talked about Ali Nassif's death during a televised speech on October 11, describing how his lieutenant died while defending Lebanese -- many of whom were Shiite members of Hezbollah -- living in Syria.

The explanation strained credulity, and the following day Shiite Lebanese journalist Nadim Koteich spent ten minutes on prime time television picking apart Nasrallah's tortured justification. For the past nineteen months, Hezbollah has been in the Lebanese Government and never once raised the issue of Lebanese in Syria before the cabinet. The explanation, Koteich said, "was just not convincing." Hezbollah supporters are also starting to ask questions. To wit, during a September visit to Lebanon, I was told about a founding member of the party who was shocked and dismayed to learn that his grandson had been deployed to Damascus to defend the Shiites' Seyyida Zeinab mosque.

While Hezbollah has been active in Syria, nearly six years have passed since the group's last significant military operation against Israel. In the absence of so-called resistance, Hezbollah is struggling to maintain its relevance in Lebanon. Accordingly, last month Hezbollah held a mass rally in the southern suburb of Beirut to protest the YouTube trailer mocking Mohammed, in which the keynote address was delivered by Hassan Nasrallah. It was his first public appearance since December 2011.

More recently, on October 11 -- perhaps in an effort to deflect growing criticism of the resistance's provision of military assistance to the Assad regime which has so far killed nearly 30,000 Syrian civilians -- Nasrallah claimed credit during a television appearance for flying an Iranian-built unmanned aerial vehicle, or UAV, over Israel. While the UAV stunt may at least temporarily remind Lebanese of the popular role Hezbollah has historically played in "resisting" Israel, the proliferation of body bags returning from Syria remains a problem for the organization.

Changing political dynamics in Beirut -- largely the result of events in Syria -- also pose a challenge for Hezbollah. Today, not only does the militia face the prospect of losing Assad, it also stands to lose the next elections and control of the Government. For while Hezbollah itself continues to command broad support among Shiites, the organization's Christian coalition partner, the Free Patriotic Movement led by Michel Aoun, appears to be losing popularity. At the same time, Lebanon's small but politically powerful Druze community headed by Walid Jumblatt is poised to bolt from the Hezbollah-led bloc and realign with the remnants of the pro-West, so-called March 14 coalition, enabling it to form a Government.

To be sure, this combination of developments will not lead to the unraveling of the militia anytime soon. Even if Hezbollah is unable to rearm, with an estimated 100,000 rockets and missiles in its arsenal, the organization could potentially conduct several more wars with Israel and has the wherewithal to indefinitely withstand all domestic adversaries.

However, the Syrian uprising has changed Nasrallah and will ultimately transform Hezbollah. The resistance today is not what it was in 2006. Diminished in stature if not capability, after Assad falls, the organization will almost certainly find itself in a more disadvantageous position in Lebanon and the region. Over the years, Hezbollah has demonstrated resilience, ingenuity, and the repeated ability to surprise. Make no mistake, the organization remains dangerous and will surely continue to threaten and kill Lebanese and target Israelis. But barring some dramatic change in the trajectory of events in Syria, Hezbollah's days of dominating Lebanon are numbered. As the militia's recent behavior suggests, Hezbollah sees the writing on the wall.

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