

Hezbollah's Ideological Crisis

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Articles & Testimony

There are few takers for Hezbollah's contorted logic that the Syrian rebellion is an American or Israeli scheme, so the group may eventually feel the need to rejuvenate its "resistance" credentials by confronting Israel directly.

T*his essay originally appeared in the Institute study [No Good Outcome: How Israel Could Be Drawn into the Syrian Conflict \(http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/no-good-outcome-how-israel-could-be-drawn-into-the-syrian-conflict\)](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/no-good-outcome-how-israel-could-be-drawn-into-the-syrian-conflict) (*Policy Focus 131*).*

Since the end of the July 2006 war, Hezbollah secretary-general Hassan Nasrallah has given nearly all his public speeches from the safety of a secure bunker (with this exception). But in early August 2013, Nasrallah made a rare appearance on al-Quds (Jerusalem) Day to rally supporters in the face of some of the most severe challenges Hezbollah has ever encountered. He had his work cut out for him on the day of the speech, and he still does today.

Hezbollah operatives have been indicted for the murder of former Lebanese prime minister Rafiq Hariri at the UN Special Tribunal for Lebanon (STL) in The Hague, arrested on charges of plotting attacks in Nigeria, and convicted on similar charges in Thailand and Cyprus. The European Union has blacklisted the military wing of Hezbollah, and the Gulf Cooperation Council similarly banned any support for the group from GCC countries and started deporting suspected supporters.

But all this pales in comparison to the existential challenges Hezbollah faces over its active participation in the war in Syria. By siding with the Assad regime, the regime's Alawite supporters, and Iran, and taking up arms against Sunni rebels, Hezbollah has placed itself at the epicenter of a sectarian conflict that has nothing to do with the group's purported *raison d'être*: "resistance" to Israeli occupation. As one Shiite Lebanese satirist put it the day after Nasrallah's speech, "Either the fighters have lost Palestine on the map and think it is in Syria [or] they were informed that the road to Jerusalem runs through Qusayr and Homs," locations in Syria where Hezbollah has fought with Assad loyalists against Sunni rebels.

The implication is clear: Lebanon's Party of God is no longer a pure "Islamic resistance" fighting Israel but a sectarian militia and Iranian proxy doing Bashar al-Assad and Ayatollah Ali Khamenei of Iran's bidding at the expense of fellow Muslims. And it therefore does not surprise that the pokes come from extremist circles too. In June, the Abdullah Azzam Brigades, a Lebanon-based al-Qaeda-affiliated group, released a statement challenging Nasrallah and his Hezbollah fighters "to fire one bullet at occupied Palestine and claim responsibility" for it. They could fire at Israel from either Lebanon or Syria, the statement continued, seeing as Hezbollah "fired thousands of shells and bullets upon unarmed Sunnis and their women, elderly, and children, and destroyed their homes on top of them."

But while taunts might be expected from Sunni extremist groups, Hezbollah now faces challenges it never would have anticipated just a few years ago. For example, the day before Nasrallah's August speech Lebanese president Michel Suleiman called, for the first time ever, for the state to curtail Hezbollah's ability to operate as an independent militia outside the control of the government. By sending fighters to Syria, many Lebanese believe Hezbollah has put its interests as a group ahead of those of Lebanon as a state, something that blatantly contradicts Hezbollah's longtime efforts to portray itself as a group that is first and foremost Lebanese. Now the group that describes itself as the vanguard standing up for the dispossessed in the face of injustice, and that has always tried to downplay its sectarian and pro-Iranian identities, finds those assertions challenged over its refusal to abide by the Lebanese government's official position of noninterference in Syria. To the contrary, its proactive support of a brutal Alawite regime against the predominantly Sunni Syrian opposition undermines its long-cultivated image as a distinctly Lebanese "resistance" movement.

At one point, Nasrallah tried to paper over the fact that Lebanese Shiites and Lebanese Sunnis were now openly battling one another in Syria, and threatening to drag that sectarian fighting across the border into Lebanon, by proposing that Lebanese Shiites and Sunnis agree to disagree over Syria. Addressing Lebanese Sunnis, Nasrallah said in a speech this past May: "We disagree over Syria. You fight in Syria; we fight in Syria; then let's fight there. Do you want me to be more frank? Keep Lebanon aside. Why should we fight in Lebanon?" But that pitch did not go over so well with Nasrallah's fellow Lebanese, who wanted an end to Lebanese interference in the war in Syria, not a gentleman's agreement that Lebanese citizens would only slaughter one another across the border.

In that same speech, Nasrallah addressed the "two grave dangers" facing Lebanon. The first, he argued, is "Israel and its intentions, greed, and schemes." The second danger, Nasrallah added, is "the changes taking place in Syria." As for Israel, Nasrallah warned that it threatens Lebanon every day. And as for Syria, the regime there faces an "axis led by the United States which is for sure the decision maker." The British, French, Italians, Germans, Arabs, and Turks are involved too, but "all of them work for the American [sic]." And the true force behind the "changes taking place in Syria"? "We also know that this axis is implicitly supported by Israel because the U.S. project in the region is Israeli cum laude." Hezbollah is not fighting in Syria as part of a sectarian conflict, Nasrallah insisted, but combating a radical Sunni, Takfiri project with ties to al-Qaeda that "is funded and backed by America" out of an American interest to destroy the region. In other words, the war in Syria is no longer a popular revolution against a political regime, but a place where America is seeking to impose its own political project on the region. Nasrallah concluded: "Well, we all know that the U.S. project in the region is an absolutely Israeli project." And so, by fighting in Syria, "today we consider ourselves defending Lebanon, Palestine, and Syria."

But there are few takers outside Hezbollah's staunchest Shiite supporters for the contorted logic that the Syrian rebellion is an American or Israeli scheme. Only when Israeli airstrikes have targeted weapons stockpiles -- either weapons being transferred from the Assad regime to Syria or stockpiles of strategic weapons such as Russian Yakhont antiship cruise missiles -- have the Assad regime and Hezbollah been able to credibly point a finger at Israel.

For example, in July 2013 an Israeli airstrike targeted a warehouse near Latakia housing sophisticated antiship missiles. Two months earlier, Israeli fighters targeted a shipment of mobile surface-to-surface Fateh-110 missiles, among other military equipment, which Israel feared were intended for Hezbollah. And in January 2013, Israel targeted a convoy transporting Russian SA-17 surface-to-air missiles, which Israel believed were being transferred to Hezbollah. But even when such strikes have occurred, Israeli officials have publicly and explicitly made clear that Israel has no interest in becoming a party to the war in Syria. Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu reiterated in June that "Israel is not getting involved in the civil war in Syria, as long as the fire is not directed at us."

Unfortunately for Hezbollah, Netanyahu's statement is no mere propaganda. The Israelis have a longstanding policy of trying to prevent the delivery of weapons to terrorist groups like Hezbollah -- from boarding the *Karine-A* on the high seas in 2002, to sending warplanes to destroy a reported Iranian weapons factory operating in Sudan in October 2012, and more -- and have not interfered in the Syrian war in any way other than through these few isolated strikes targeting weapons caches. Which is why, contrary to conventional wisdom, Hezbollah may try to draw Israel into the war.

In early August, such an incident occurred when four Israeli soldiers were wounded by two explosions while patrolling the border with Lebanon. According to *al-Akhbar*, a Lebanese daily considered to be a Hezbollah mouthpiece, these explosions were part of an organized "ambush" aimed at highlighting Hezbollah's "intelligence structure" capabilities. Hezbollah may also seek a pretext for launching a limited number of rockets at Israel, perhaps as a response to an Israeli counterstrike after a cross-border raid. Hezbollah has already called for Palestinian groups to organize and carry out attacks on Israel from the Golan Heights, and Nasrallah has offered to aid any group that does so.

Hezbollah took a similar posture later that month, when in the aftermath of the August 21 chemical weapons attack in Damascus, the United States (at first) seemed poised to issue a punitive strike on Syria for violating President Obama's redline on the use of chemical weapons. Immediately, pro-Hezbollah sheikh Afif Nabulsi warned that "any [U.S.] strike against Syria would be met by harsh responses against U.S. interests in the region and against Israel directly." A senior source close to Hezbollah clarified, telling the Daily Star that "if the Western attack is limited to certain targets in Syria, then Hezbollah will not intervene." But, he continued, "in the event of a qualitative strike that aims to change the balance of power in Syria, Hezbollah will fight on various fronts," including through "the inferno of a war with Israel." The reference here was clearly to the possibility of Hezbollah firing rockets into Israel. U.S. strikes may have provided Hezbollah with the alternative opportunity it is seeking to hit Israel -- but, again, not so hard as to elicit a pounding in return.

Without an Israeli straw man to justify the maintenance of its arms as "legitimate resistance," Hezbollah is left with precious little justification for its existence as an independent militia outside the control of the Lebanese government. Worse still, so long as Hezbollah continues to fight alongside Iran and the Assad regime against Sunni rebels, it will increasingly be seen as a sectarian fighting force undermining the security and political interests of the Lebanese state. Hezbollah continues to hone its military capabilities along the border with Israel and, according to Maj. Gen. Yair Golan, head of Israel's Northern Command, in comparison to seven years ago, when the group last battled Israel, "Hezbollah is better armed, better trained and more cautious." At some point, Hezbollah may feel the need to rejuvenate its "resistance" credentials. And when it does, Israel will be in the crosshairs of Lebanon's Party of God once more.

Matthew Levitt directs The Washington Institute's Stein Program on Counterterrorism and Intelligence and is author of [Hezbollah: The Global Footprint of Lebanon's Party of God](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/hezbollah-the-global-footprint-of-lebanons-party-of-god) (<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/hezbollah-the-global-footprint-of-lebanons-party-of-god>). ❖

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