

Hezbollah's Karma in Syria

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By supporting the massacres in Syria over the past sixteen months, Hassan Nasrallah and Hezbollah engendered the hatred of millions of Sunnis next door, who will almost assuredly hold a grudge after Assad's ouster.

Earlier this month, 48 Iranian Shiite "pilgrims" were abducted in Damascus. The Free Syrian Army claims they were members of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps, who have been dispatched to Syria to protect one of Tehran's vital interests, Bashar al-Assad's regime. It's not the first time that anti-regime rebels have captured who they claim are Iranian-trained Assad allies. Since May, another armed opposition group called the "Syrian Revolutionaries-Aleppo Province" has been holding eleven Lebanese Shiites who say they are simply making their way back home after a trip to Iran for religious purposes. Initially, at least, these rebels alleged that five of these self-described pilgrims were in reality Hezbollah officials.

In recent weeks, the revolutionaries have tempered their assertions about the Hezbollah association of all the Lebanese captives, but the Syrian opposition is still holding the organization responsible for Assad regime atrocities. In a statement provided to Al Jazeera, the kidnappers indicated that negotiations for the hostages would be predicated on Hezbollah general secretary Hassan Nasrallah apologizing for "assist[ing] in the suppression of the uprising." Nasrallah refused to express contrition for supporting Assad, but Hezbollah's own hostage crisis has just added to his recent woes.

Prior to the so-called "Arab Spring," Nasrallah was among the most beloved and feared men in the Arab world. But a year and a half into the popular Syrian uprising, with Hezbollah's allies in Damascus in trouble and the militia's clerical patrons in Tehran facing a possible American or Israeli attack, Nasrallah seems to have lost his mojo. Lately, the once confident and charismatic Nasrallah has been more whiney than menacing. Nasrallah has not only taken up the cause of the detained "pilgrims" in most of his speeches, but he has also defined the prisoner's release as a policy priority of the Lebanese government, which, says Nasrallah, bears full responsibility for their return.

During his May 25 speech celebrating Liberation Day -- when Israeli troops withdrew from southern Lebanon in 2000 -- Nasrallah bemoaned the kidnappings at length. "Religiously, this is forbidden. Morally, this is a very disgraceful crime," he said. Moreover, he advised, "kidnapping the innocent does harm to you and all what you claim or say you are seeking."

Just a week later at his lecture commemorating the death of the founder of the Islamic Republic of Iran, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, Nasrallah made a personal appeal to the hijackers. "If you have any problem with me [or] Hezbollah," he said, "let's separate the cause of the kidnapped and put it aside and let's solve your problem with us. Using the innocent visitors as hostages to resolve the problem -- regardless of its nature and essence -- is a great injustice you should abandon."

Coming from the longtime leader of Hezbollah, the anti-kidnapping messaging is not particularly credible. After all, in the 1980s kidnapping Westerners in Lebanon was an essential element of the organization's modus operandi. Even today, Hezbollah still favors the tactic, now prizing Israeli civilian and military targets. Needless to say, Hezbollah has not suddenly reformed and decided to reject kidnapping. The organization merely opposes the abduction of its members.

Meanwhile, the affiliation of all the Lebanese detainees remains unclear. When the news of the kidnapping broke, Voice of Beirut International Radio reported that six of the abducted men held posts with Hezbollah, including officials responsible for explosives and ammunition in the south, intelligence in Bint Jbeil, and training camps in the Bekaa Valley. It also identified one of the detainees, Ali Safa, as Nasrallah's nephew.

While the story may have been fabricated by Hezbollah detractors to embarrass the militia, it is plausible that at least some of the men have a connection to the organization. Most compelling, perhaps, is the fact that three of the same men identified as members of Hezbollah in the Voice of Beirut report subsequently confirmed their names (if not their identities) in a video of the kidnapped men released to Al Jazeera.

Regardless of exactly who these alleged "pilgrims" are -- and we may never know -- there is some poetic justice in Nasrallah suffering the frustration of vulnerability in the face of kidnapping. At the same time, by supporting the massacres over the past 16 months, Nasrallah and Hezbollah engendered the hatred of millions of Sunnis next door who almost assuredly will hold a grudge after Assad. Ultimately, this dynamic is likely to exacerbate sectarian tensions along the Lebanese/Syrian border, exposing Lebanon's Shiites to violence on a scale not seen in decades.

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