

Dinner in Damascus: What Did Iran Ask of Hizballah?

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Brief Analysis

On February 26, Syrian president Bashar al-Asad hosted Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinezhad and Hizballah leader Hassan Nasrallah for a dinner in Damascus. Nasrallah is a routine guest in the capital, but the timing of this high-profile trip -- just a week after the United States dispatched Undersecretary of State William Burns to Damascus and nominated its first new ambassador in five years -- seemed calculated not only to irritate Washington, but also to highlight the central role Hizballah plays in Iran and Syria's strategic planning. Apart from serving as a pivot between Tehran and Damascus, however, the group also holds the power to engulf Lebanon and perhaps the entire region into another war through actions of its own.

Unfulfilled Promise of Retaliation

Two years after Hizballah military commander Imad Mughniyah was assassinated in Damascus -- prompting Nasrallah to declare an "open war" on Israel, the presumed perpetrator -- the group has yet to successfully retaliate. But it is not for lack of trying: in 2008, two Hizballah operatives and several Azerbaijani nationals were convicted of plotting attacks against the Israeli and U.S. embassies in Baku and sentenced to fifteen years in prison. The same year, Turkish authorities foiled as many as six possible Hizballah terrorist plots targeting Israelis and possibly the local Jewish community. Iranian intelligence agents were reportedly helping the group establish a network of operatives posing as tourists.

During his February 16, 2010 speech marking the martyrdom of Mughniyah and other Hizballah heroes, Nasrallah rationalized the conspicuous lack of significant retaliation: "Our options are open and we have all the time in the world....[W]e are the ones to choose the time and place and target." He also suggested that Hizballah had not yet found a target that "rises to the level" of Mughniyah.

Meanwhile, the group has been preparing for a conventional fight against Israel by stockpiling weapons in the south in violation of UN Security Council resolutions. In July 2009, for example, a large arms depot believed to contain bullets, rockets, and artillery shells exploded in Khirbet Silim village, nine miles north of the Israeli border. Three months later, another Hizballah cache detonated near Tayr Filsay village just south of the Litani River. It is unclear whether these explosions were coincidental or acts of (presumably) Israeli sabotage. In addition, a month after the second explosion, the Israeli navy interdicted a ship carrying fifty-five tons of Iranian weapons to Hizballah. Then, in January 2010, UN peacekeepers uncovered 660 pounds of explosives buried along the Israel border, reportedly pre-positioned by the Shiite militia.

These discoveries represent only a fraction of the weapons Hizballah has procured during its most recent massive military buildup. Since the 2006 war with Israel, the group has acquired an estimated 40,000 rockets and -- with Syria's help -- reportedly improved the quality of its arsenal. In addition to boosting the range of this stockpile, Syria may have provided the organization with the Russian-made shoulder-fired Igla-S antiaircraft system, which is capable of downing Israeli F-16s. Nasrallah hinted at this possibility in February 2009, stating, "Every few days, reports appear that the resistance has acquired...sophisticated air defense missiles," adding coyly, "Of course, I neither deny nor confirm this." U.S. officials have already confirmed in the Arab press that Hizballah is training with Syria on the antiquated SA-2 antiaircraft system.

New Strategy against Israel

To complement its upgraded arsenal, Hizballah recently spelled out a new, more aggressive military posture toward Israel. Since the 2006 war, rumors have persisted that the group would cross the border and "take the fighting to Israel" in the next conflict. During his February 16, speech, Nasrallah offered a new vision of strategic parity with Israel, if not an advanced conception of the organization's longstanding "balance of terror" strategy.

Deriding Israel's "Iron Dome" missile defense system as a "science fiction movie," Nasrallah upped the ante by pledging to go toe to toe with Israel in the next campaign. In 2009, he had warned that if Israel bombed the Hizballah stronghold in Beirut's southern Dahiya suburb, then the group would "bomb Tel Aviv." This time he went one step further, stating that if Israel bombed Beirut airport, "We will bomb Ben Gurion airport," and then adding ports, oil refineries,

factories, and power plants to the list. He also boasted that Hizballah would confront Israeli threats "not with withdrawal, hiding, or fear, but with clarity, steadfastness, preparedness, and with threats, too."

Repairing Hizballah's Image in Lebanon

Despite considerable success in rebuilding an impressive military infrastructure under the nose of UN observers, Hizballah's image has suffered at home. In May 2008, the group invaded and occupied Beirut. In June 2009, it failed to win a majority in Lebanese parliamentary elections. That same month, the fraudulent presidential election in Iran undermined the legitimacy of Hizballah's chief patron and its controversial doctrine of velayat-e faqih (Islamic governance), to which the group adheres.

Even more detrimental to Hizballah's domestic standing is evidence implicating the group in the 2005 assassination of former Lebanese premier Rafiq Hariri, as reported by Der Spiegel in May 2009 and underscored by Le Monde last month. Nasrallah has repeatedly denied these stories, but the public perception that the Shiite militia was involved in the killing of the Lebanese Sunni leader persists. Worse, in September 2009, one of Hizballah's chief local financiers went bankrupt in a Ponzi scheme -- a particularly damaging scandal given that it involved the same kind of corruption that the group routinely accuses the Sunni government in Beirut of perpetrating.

Nasrallah has attempted to mitigate the impact of these accusations and soften public attitudes toward the group. In his February 16 speech, for example, he offered condolences to the Hariris on the anniversary of Rafiq's martyrdom. And in December 2009, he delivered a surreal speech promoting the novel idea that his constituents should adhere to Lebanese laws, such as respecting traffic signals, paying for (as opposed to stealing) government water and electricity, abiding by building laws and civil codes, and putting an end to smuggling that undercuts Lebanese businesses. In addition, he emphasized the importance of civil servants showing up for their jobs and actually performing their duties.

Hizballah's efforts to improve its image also included the publication of a new "manifesto" in November 2009, updating its 1985 charter. Although the new document reiterated the group's longstanding enmity toward the United States and its commitment to "resistance," it differed from the 1985 version in ways seemingly designed to reingratiate the organization to a broad Lebanese audience. For example, the new version downplayed Hizballah's allegiance to the clerical leadership in Tehran and instead focused on its participation in the Lebanese political system. Likewise, rather than urging Lebanese Christians to convert -- as the 1985 manifesto put it, "We call upon you to embrace Islam" -- the group adopted the more palatable conciliatory language of consensus politics.

Conclusion

If Hizballah succeeds in avenging Mughniyah by striking an Israeli target -- whether on the border or abroad -- it could set off another round of fighting similar to that of 2006. This time, however, other actors could well enter the fray. If one takes Damascus at its word, Syria may decide to participate in the next Israeli-Hizballah war, a development that could spark a region-wide conflagration. At the moment, Hizballah may be keeping its powder dry on orders from Tehran, in anticipation of an Israeli strike against Iranian nuclear facilities. Still, avenging Mughniyah is a key priority for the group, and its success or failure in meeting this goal could be the difference between the current status quo and a regional war.

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