

A Boatload of Trouble

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Articles & Testimony

Ever since the end of the war in the summer of 2006 between Israel and the radical Lebanese Shiite organization, Hezbollah, there has been a major effort on the part of Hezbollah to rearm, especially with offensive weapons such as rockets and medium-range missiles. The organization has also rebuilt its bunker and defensive positions in southern Lebanon, despite the presence of the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL), which expanded following the 2006 war to its current size of 12,425 troops from 30 countries.

In sheer numbers, this international force is much larger than the one I personally observed in southern Lebanon on numerous extended visits earlier this decade, when my own country of Sweden was actively participating in UNIFIL's mission. Yet the sad fact is that today, notwithstanding its greatly increased size and strengthened mandate, UNIFIL has consistently failed to hinder Hezbollah from regaining its position as the only serious political and military player in southern Lebanon. The organization has even been unable to stop continued shipments of arms to Hezbollah, despite UNIFIL's explicit U.N. mandate against them. These arms shipments come mainly from Hezbollah's leading backer, Iran. Since long before the 2006 war, the bulk of the weapons and munitions came overland through Syria -- where they were flown in from Iran -- but there have been attempts to smuggle weapons into Lebanon by sea as well.

Accordingly, it came as no great surprise last Wednesday when the Israeli navy seized an Antigua-flagged ship outside Cyprus carrying almost 400 tons of weapons originating out of an Iranian port and bound for Hezbollah, via Syria. The cargo is considerably larger than anything previously intercepted, demonstrating the degree to which Hezbollah, and to a lesser extent Hamas in Gaza, is being resupplied by their main backer, Iran.

The shipment, of course, contravenes recent U.N. Security Council resolutions prohibiting Iran's arms exports and U.N. Security Council Resolution 1701, which ended the 2006 Israel-Hezbollah war. The seized weapons -- including offensive ones such as Katyushas, intended to target noncombatants -- show, yet again, the failure of the international community to come to grips with Hezbollah and its intent to disrupt any peace process with Israel.

This incident also shows Hezbollah's continuing dominance of Lebanon's domestic political scene. Since the 2006 war, there has been a long series of failures in confronting Lebanon's truly divisive political issues, particularly the problem of militant Islamism. Hezbollah has been able to call the shots in Lebanese politics, hindering any attempts to put together a new government unless it restores Hezbollah's decisive influence and reverses the movement's electoral loss last June. The organization has also been able to keep the conflict with Israel alive and simmering, though avoiding any dramatic new escalation thus far.

The repercussions of the 2006 war continues to weaken liberal and democratic forces in the region, which are essential for any peace-building process to succeed. Hezbollah's drive to rearm for another round with Israel endangers regional stability and has had a paralyzing effect on Lebanese democracy. On the regional level, the 2006 war and Israel's Operation Cast Lead against Hamas last winter have put "armed struggle" back on the agenda.

Hezbollah continues to proclaim the 2006 war as a victory. By tying this war to other "victories" for Islamist forces,

such as the May 2000 Israeli withdrawal from the Lebanese security zone and the August 2005 withdrawal from Gaza, Hezbollah and its Iranian patrons maintain the fiction that armed struggle is alive and well, and should be used as a means to defeat Israel. This lends some popular credence to the notion that there is no need to get involved in complicated and drawn-out negotiations with uncertain outcomes. One can get results, or so Hezbollah claims, only by taking on and defeating Israel on the battlefield. If a sufficient number of other Arab actors adopt that self-destructive analysis, the stage will be set for many more armed conflagrations that could envelop the region for many years to come.

The seizure of the weapons cargo marks a small dent in the military buildup of Hezbollah. But it amounts to no more than a temporary nuisance for the organization, unless the international community gets serious about implementing the resolutions that stopped the 2006 war in the first place.

As of the time of writing, there is no sign of that happening.

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