

Hizballah Will Defend Iran -- Not Palestinians

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Brief Analysis

Responding to the Israeli military campaign against Hamas in Gaza, the Lebanese Shiite militia cum political party Hizballah denounced the Jewish state and organized large rallies. Hizballah secretary general Hassan Nasrallah went so far as to call for a popular insurrection against the pro-West regime in Egypt, whose stance was not deemed sufficiently supportive of Hamas. Despite the strong rhetorical response, however, four days into the Israeli operation the organization had still not fired a single rocket into Israel in defense of the Palestinians. Absent a dramatic change of conditions on the ground, Hizballah is unlikely to participate in this round of hostilities.

Background

In addition to its purported mission of defending Lebanon, the Shiite militia has long articulated a commitment to the "liberation" of Palestinian territories. During his September 2008 Jerusalem Day speech, for example, Nasrallah stated that "Jerusalem and Palestine, from the river to the sea, are for the Palestinian people, for the Arabs, and the Muslims. No one has the authority to relinquish one grain of sand . . . everything in it is holy." Earlier this month, his deputy, Naim Qassem, described Palestine as "the central issue," adding that Hizballah was "committed to liberating it in its entirety."

The Shiite militia's support for the "liberation" of Palestine extends beyond the rhetoric of its senior officials. Reports of Hizballah providing training to Palestinian terrorist organizations in Lebanon date back nearly a decade. Indeed, during a 1997 interview with MBC television, Nasrallah admitted that Hizballah had trained both Gaza-based Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad fighters in Lebanon.

While there is little evidence to suggest ongoing operational coordination between the Shiite militia and Hamas, the Hizballah kidnapping/killing of two Israeli soldiers that sparked a three-week war in 2006 occurred less than three weeks after Hamas kidnapped an Israeli soldier near the Gaza Strip. The Hamas kidnapping touched off Operation Summer Rains, the Israel Defense Force's (IDF's) first large-scale ground incursion into Gaza since its 2005 withdrawal.

Strategic Calculations

There is little doubt that like 2006, Hizballah is capable of opening and sustaining a second front against Israel.

Despite several UN resolutions designed to prevent postwar rearming of the militia, Hizballah today is believed to be in possession of tens of thousands of rockets, many of which can hit Israel's main population centers. In summer 2006, the militia fought the IDF to a standstill, inflicting and sustaining heavy casualties during the three-week conflagration. The IDF was unable to suppress Hizballah rocket fire, which continued unabated until the ceasefire and crippled economic activity in northern Israel.

Yet there is little indication that Hizballah is interested in provoking another confrontation with Israel at present. Hizballah's primarily Shiite constituents in southern Lebanon are war weary and have not completely recuperated from the last war. In the aftermath of the February 2008 assassination of longtime Hizballah military commander Imad Mughniyah -- and Nasrallah's threats to retaliate against Israel -- nervous Shiites from the south reportedly flocked to the passport office in Tyre to prepare for another possible mass exodus. Moreover, Hizballah and its political allies appear to be well positioned for the spring 2009 Lebanese parliamentary elections, and another war would risk undermining the organization at the polls.

Another factor contributing to Hizballah's current restraint is the Israeli government's declaratory policy on the next war with Lebanon. Aware of Washington's support for the democratically elected pro-West government in Beirut, Israel largely avoided targeting sensitive and expensive Lebanese infrastructure -- most notably the electricity grid -- during its three-week air campaign in 2006. But this past summer, in anticipation of the spring 2009 elections and the very real possibility that Hizballah would take control of the government, Israeli prime minister Ehud Olmert stated that "if Hezbollah gains more strength, we will no longer place any limitations on ourselves." And as Israeli minister of the environment Gideon Ezra later clarified, "The entire Lebanese state will be a target in the same way that all of Israel is a target for Hizballah."

It is fair to assume that Hizballah is currently operating under the premise that Israel will broaden its target set in Lebanon, even if the next conflict occurs prior to the spring 2009 elections.

Attack on Iran a Different Story

Hizballah's restraint vis-a-vis Gaza is unlikely to be repeated in the event of an Israeli attack on Iran. Since its establishment in the 1980s, Hizballah has been joined at the hip to the regime in Tehran. Not only does the organization receive financial backing, military training, and advanced weapons systems from Iran, it gets spiritual and policy guidance from Tehran's clerical hierarchy.

The organization routinely denies that it would come to the assistance of the Islamic Republic should it come under Israeli attack. In June 2006, Hizballah's commander for southern Lebanon Shaikh Nabil Qaouk told Time magazine, "The resistance is for the protection of Lebanon. . . . It has no other projects, nor acts on behalf of other countries." Iran, he added, was capable of defending itself.

Yet despite repeated denials, unlike the current situation in Gaza, significant questions remain about how Hizballah would respond to an attack against its Iranian patron. Uncertainty persists because the organization is an unapologetic proponent of velayat-e faqih, the doctrine that designates Iran's supreme leader Ali Khamenei as spiritual and political leader of the Islamic world.

In 2003, Hizballah secretary general Nasrallah stated that his organization did not "take orders from the velayat-e faqih." The organization, he said, "only follow[s] the velayat-e faqih in religious affairs as well as to legitimize the resistance [Hizballah] against the [Israeli] occupiers." Nevertheless, evidence suggests that Hizballah's leaders are not independent decisionmakers, but rather act in accordance with Tehran's edicts. In this context, Iran's influence on Hizballah's organizational structure is particularly revealing.

This past November, Iranian sway with Hizballah was clearly evident during Hizballah's Eighth Party Congress, a principal internal policymaking body of the organization. A top item on the agenda concerned leadership. Nasrallah

was elected secretary general in 1992, following the assassination of his predecessor, and has led the organization ever since, serving three subsequent four-year terms. During the November meeting, Nasrallah stood for his fifth election, despite Hizballah bylaws that limit the secretary general to two terms.

In an organization that prides itself on democratic decisionmaking, the issue was potentially controversial. According to Lebanese press accounts of the congress, however, the leadership question spurred little debate, as the issue was resolved by a fatwa (religious edict), from Khamenei in Tehran, mandating that Nasrallah's term as secretary general be extended for life.

By weighing in on this key Hizballah internal personnel matter, Tehran revealed its considerable influence over its Lebanese client. Protestations aside, the velayat-e faqih's impact with Hizballah extends well beyond "religious affairs." Given this clear dynamic, it is inconceivable that if Iran asked for Hizballah military support against Israel, the Shiite militia would demur.

Conclusion

If the Israeli air campaign against Hamas persists and evolves into ground operations, Hizballah -- at the encouragement of its Iranian patrons -- could be pressed to enter the fray. For the time being, however, it seems likely that Tehran will continue to urge Hizballah restraint, preferring instead to maintain its assets in southern Lebanon for another time. Meanwhile, Hizballah secretary general Nasrallah will continue to criticize and embarrass Western-aligned Arab states like Egypt and Jordan, who he says are colluding "to impose the conditions of surrender on the resisters of the American-Zionist project."

By fomenting civil unrest in these states, Nasrallah rallies support for Hamas, undermines Washington's allies, and confirms his own preeminent regional role. In lieu of firing rockets into Israel and dragging Lebanon into another costly war, this strategy is a relatively effective and cost-free demonstration of Hizballah's Arab nationalist and pro-Palestinian resistance bona fides.

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