

# Laying Out the Qana Calculation: Disarming Hezbollah Prevents More Crises

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Israeli footage of the Hezbollah katushya rocket launcher entering the parking structure of the residential apartment building in Qana, Lebanon, was compelling if not indisputable. But regardless of whether Israel convinces the international community that Hezbollah was using innocent civilians to shelter rocket launchers, the tragic death of more than 50 Lebanese in Qana is going to prove a pivotal moment in the Hezbollah-Israel war.

Indeed, in the coming weeks, international pressure for a cease-fire will be so intense that Washington will be hard-pressed to continue advocating a truce encompassing a comprehensive framework to disarm Hezbollah.

Of course, this is what Hezbollah wanted from the start.

With significant popularity among the Shia in the South, Hezbollah operates as a “fish within the sea,” able to attack the enemy and disappear into a supportive environment. This enables Hezbollah to fire rockets from villages, inviting harsh Israeli retaliation, resulting in a mass exodus of Lebanese refugees. Hezbollah also fires on Israel from Christian villages in the south, ignoring pleas from these villages—like those from Ayn Ibil—not to do so.

Hezbollah launches missile volleys at Israel from positions endangering UN observation posts. Indeed, the Ottawa Citizen reported last week that a Canadian UN observer stationed in the village of Khiam e-mailed home that “we’ve got Hezbollah fighters running around in our positions . . . using us for shields and then engaging the [Israeli Defense Forces].” On July 26, this observer and three others were killed when an Israeli bomb hit the post.

The rising civilian casualties and the refugee crisis fit nicely into the Shia militia’s strategy. As an “Islamic resistance” organization—this is how the group describes itself—Hezbollah and its adherents do not hold the group accountable for the martyrs or the suffering. To the contrary, for Hezbollah, the more Lebanese civilians who die the more need there is for “the resistance” to protect Lebanon. Suffering simply reinforces the group’s ethos.

For Iran and Syria, the rising death count in Lebanon also holds potential political gains. Increased international pressure for a truce has generated a torrent of calls to engage Tehran and Damascus, Hezbollah’s leading patrons. Engaging with Damascus would end the pariah state’s isolation, which has been enforced since the killing of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri in 2005. It would also offer the prospect of a Syrian return to Lebanon. For Iran,

the focus on Hezbollah provides a welcome distraction to move ahead with its nuclear ambitions free of international censure.

The calculation is different for Israel. Rising civilian casualties in Lebanon have not been accompanied by a quantifiable degradation of Hezbollah's military capabilities. Israel has experienced unacceptable casualties during ground operations, and at the same time, international condemnation of Israel is peaking. Until recently, there has been widespread Israeli support for the campaign against Hezbollah, but these latest developments have generated a debate in Israel as to the continued efficacy of operations.

In the initial weeks of the conflict, Israel saw little international condemnation for its operations in Lebanon. Sunday's tragedy in Qana marks the end of grudging international tolerance of Israel's action against Hezbollah. It also will probably mark a shift in Washington's position. Since July 12, Washington has been trying to balance the competing priorities of securing a truce and disarming Hezbollah. As such, the U.S. has been pressing for any cease-fire agreement to include a framework for addressing Hezbollah weapons. Caught between its support for Israeli goals vis-à-vis Hezbollah, and its sympathy for Lebanon and desire to consolidate the goals of the Cedar Revolution, the Bush administration may now see the wisdom of an expedited cease-fire.

During UN discussions on a cease-fire this week, it will be tempting to move toward a lowest-common-denominator approach—a deal that avoids the contentious issue of Hezbollah weapons in favor of fewer (if any) conditions from this organization. The danger of this approach, of course, is that Hezbollah may emerge from this disastrous war intact and with a burnished reputation for once again “defeating” Israel, further emboldening Syria and Iran, and almost certainly sowing the seeds for the next round of fighting.

In 1996 U.S. shuttle diplomacy kicked into high gear after the last tragedy at Qana resulted in the deaths of scores of innocent Lebanese. The U.S. effort resulted in relatively contained violence between Israel and Hezbollah for nearly a decade. Today, former U.S. officials involved in this agreement point to the great “success” of the 1996 Hezbollah-Israel agreement and argue for a return to the diplomacy of old. But the real lesson from the past few weeks is that a 10-year “truce” is not enough. The problem of Hezbollah weapons did not age well and will not, particularly given Iran's progress on its nuclear problem.

The international community's failure to deal effectively with the problem earlier is largely responsible for the unfolding tragedies of today. It is time to focus on the Hezbollah disarmament. If we don't, it will only be a matter of time until, once again, Hezbollah plunges Lebanon into war and the region into crisis.

David Schenker is a senior fellow in Arab politics at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy. From 2002 to 2006, he was an adviser to Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld on Lebanon, Syria, Jordan and Palestinian affairs. ❖

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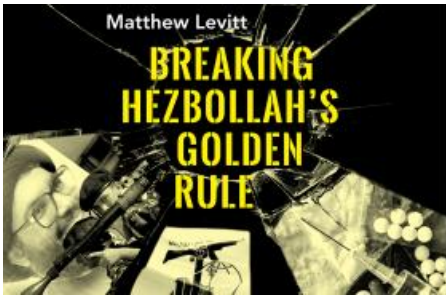
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