

Iran's Hand in Lebanon

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The current crisis in Lebanon has galvanized world attention because it is generally understood that this is not a local conflict, but rather one that represents Iran's bid to raise the stakes in the Middle East.

The fact that several countries are planning to convene next week in Rome to discuss Lebanon reflects this recognition. Moreover, that Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Jordan took the unprecedented step in blaming Hezbollah in its confrontation with Israel signals that these Arab states do not want Iran and its proxy Hezbollah to gain the upper hand. This could only embolden Iran in its current face-off with the West over its nuclear program.

Hezbollah's attack on Israel came on the eve of the G-8 summit; it is hard not to interpret this move as an Iranian attempt to divert attention from its nuclear program and remind the world that it can lash out if cornered. As the veteran leader of the Lebanese Druze Walid Jumblatt put it the other day, "This war is no longer Lebanon's—it is an Iranian war. Iran is telling the United States: You want to fight me in the Gulf and destroy my nuclear program? I will hit you at home, in Israel."

It seems the vigorous Israeli response is related to this belief that enabling Hezbollah to act with impunity now could only help Iran, while failure to do so may lead Hezbollah to believe that an Iranian nuclear umbrella would insulate it from Israeli retaliation.

It should be noted that the Iranian-Hezbollah relationship is exceedingly close. It is known that Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah once told his senior leaders, "If [Iranian Supreme leader Ayatollah Ali] Khamenei would tell me to divorce my wife, I would do it." Where Iran has failed in many parts of the Middle East in exporting its theological Shiite zeal, it has succeeded with Hezbollah.

Indeed, Iran provides Hezbollah with at least \$100 million per year and an estimated 11,000 of the 13,000 rockets in the group's possession. Dozens of Iranian Revolutionary Guards have been working with Hezbollah in Lebanon for many years.

For instance, it is believed that only the Revolutionary Guards could have fired the Chinese made C-802 radar-guided missile that hit an Israeli warship off the coast of Lebanon and killed four Israeli sailors. Israel did not know that Hezbollah had the C-802. It is also now believed that the Revolutionary Guards have a drone in Lebanon with a 50-kilo payload, which they have yet to utilize. More ominously, they are believed to have the Zilzal missile, whose

range can extend to Tel Aviv. Israeli security sources believe that they intercepted and bombed a Zilzal shipment headed for southern Lebanon.

While Hezbollah has attacked Israel some 20 times in the six years since Israel ended its southern buffer zone inside Lebanon, this month's attack demonstrates the first time the group felt self-confident enough to claim responsibility for a strike across the internationally recognized border. Apart from the G-8 Summit that followed the attack, it is interesting to look at a series of events leading up to the July 12 strike. These events suggest that Iran was pressing for Hezbollah's initiation of the crisis.

On June 15, Syrian Defense Minister Hassan Turkmani visited Teheran and signed a mutual defense pact with his Iranian counterpart Mostafa Mohammad-Najjar, including establishment of a permanent defense liaison commission. This deepened an already deep relationship extending back to the 1980s when Syria was the only Arab country to support a Persian Iran against a fellow Arab state, Iraq. At a press conference following the signing, Turkmani declared, "Our cooperation is based on a strategic pact and unity against common threats. We can have a common front against Israel's threats." Indeed, the June 15 pact is believed by senior Israeli security officials to include continued facilitation of Iranian weapons via the Damascus airport to Hezbollah in southern Lebanon. According to both Syrian and Iranian TV reports of Turkmani's visit to Teheran, Turkmani met with the head of Iran's Revolutionary Guards. As noted above, they are the Iranian link to Hezbollah in Lebanon.

The new defense pact may have given Syria, another supporter of Hezbollah, a sense that it would be shielded in the event of any Israeli retaliation. On the day of the Hezbollah attack against Israel, Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad declared, "If the Zionist regime commits another stupid move and attacks Syria, this will be considered like attacking the whole Islamic world and this regime will receive a very fierce response."

Like Iran, Syria has found that supporting Hezbollah serves its interest. During much of its 29-year occupation of Lebanon, which led to its ouster last year, Syria was happy to send missiles and facilitate weapon transfers to the militia that was injuring Israel in southern Lebanon. Not surprisingly, Hezbollah was virtually the only Lebanese backer of continued Syrian presence in Lebanon, even after most of the countrymen were disgusted with Syria's widely suspected engineering of the murder of their beloved leader, Rafik Hariri.

Iran and Syria also join hands in supporting Hamas, which captured an Israeli soldier just before Hezbollah's provocative cross-border attack. Hezbollah said its strike was in sympathy with Hamas, but other factors may have also been at work. According to the Daily Telegraph, Ali Larijani, Iran's top nuclear negotiator and head of its Supreme National Security Council, warned European negotiators in Brussels on the eve of the attack that the West "will suffer" if the Iranian nuclear issue was taken back to the United Nations Security Council. Larijani then traveled straight to Damascus. The next day, as fighting broke out in Lebanon, Larijani met representatives of Hezbollah and Hamas, which staged a similar attack near the Gaza Strip three weeks earlier, expressing support for "resistance" against Israel.

Once Hezbollah struck and Israel retaliated, the Iranian newspaper most associated as being the authoritative voice of Iranian Supreme Leader Khamenei expressed full-throated support. Hossein Shariatmadari, editor of Kayhan, wrote, "Wiping out the Zionist regime is not only a religious and national duty but a human one." He added, "political, logistical and arms support for Hamas and Hezbollah and sending combatants to the front is the minimum cost that the Islamic countries must pay for safeguarding their security and independence."

The stakes for the international community go beyond Israel itself. As its nuclear program goes forward, Iran sees itself as being on the march. This point is not lost on countries such as the United States and European and Arab states, which do not want this crisis to end with Iran and Hezbollah feeling emboldened. How the United States, in particular, translates this idea operationally will be tested as its diplomatic role moves into a new phase in the

coming days.

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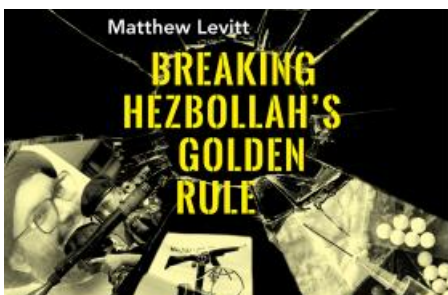
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