

Hizballah's Global Terror Option

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Brief Analysis

In a July 17 article in Kayhan, a newspaper sponsored by Iran's supreme leader, editor Hossein Shariatmadari wrote, "The Muslim nations should not let the engagement [with Israel] remain in its limited regional boundaries. The Zionists are scatted in many parts of the world and their identification is not that difficult. . . . Everywhere in the world must be made insecure for the Zionists." Even without this exhortation from Iran, there is a real possibility that the conflict could expand beyond the borders of Lebanon and Israel. History has shown that Iran and Hizballah together have significant capabilities to conduct violent terrorist attacks anywhere in the world.

Consequences of an Escalation in the Military Conflict

Unlike its previous confrontations with Hizballah, Israel appears in this conflict to have embarked on a strategy that is intended not merely to retaliate against Hizballah, but to permanently change the status quo by dismantling the organization's military capability. One of the major uncertainties in Israel's current strategy is whether air attacks alone will be able to achieve this objective. Given the current frequency of the ongoing rocket attacks against northern Israel, it appears likely that some form of ground operations may be necessary to neutralize this threat. The use of ground forces would represent a significant escalation that could have serious consequences. If faced with the prospect of its annihilation by Israeli ground forces, Hizballah might use whatever resources it had at its disposal.

One additional option for Israel is a targeted killing of Hassan Nasrallah, the leader of Hizballah. Twice this week already, Nasrallah survived attacks on his location in Beirut, though it does not appear that Nasrallah himself was the target of these attacks. Although killing Nasrallah would have some immediate benefits, in that it would remove a very capable and charismatic leader from the top of Hizballah, its value in the long term is less certain. More importantly, however, his elimination does not at the present time appear to be a high priority of the Israelis. If there is a lesson to be learned in the death of his predecessor, it is that Hizballah might well react to Nasrallah's death at the hands of the Israelis by stepping up the conflict.

If Hizballah were to decide to escalate the conflict, its options would be significantly more limited than Israel's. One option would be to attack Israel with its larger Zelzal rockets, which bring into range sensitive targets in central Israel, possibly including Ben Gurion Airport. But the Zelzal is an exceedingly complex missile to deploy in a wartime environment, and Hizballah recently failed in its first attempt this week to use the weapon. Hizballah's

other option for escalation would be to initiate terror attacks against its adversaries beyond the immediate arena of conflict.

Hizballah and Terror Outside the Region

As Ely Karmon detailed in **'Fight on All Fronts': Hizballah, the War on Terror, and the War in Iraq** (<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC04.php?CID=18>) (The Washington Institute, 2003), Hizballah has a long history of conducting terror attacks outside Lebanon and Israel. Significantly, these targets include not only Israeli and Western interests, but several Arab states as well, most notably Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Bahrain, and the United Arab Emirates. Perhaps Hizballah's most notorious attacks, however, were its bombings in Buenos Aires of the Israeli Embassy in 1992 and the Jewish Community Center in 1994. Each of these attacks was in retaliation for Israeli actions and is believed to have been conducted with Iranian assistance. The sophistication of these attacks demonstrated the ability of Hizballah and Iran to project power globally and to conduct substantial covert planning to execute attacks on short notice. It must therefore be assumed that in the years since the Argentine attacks Hizballah has continued to improve its capabilities for overseas terror attacks and that off-the-shelf plans for such attacks are available to Iran and Hizballah's military planners.

Of additional concern is the close relationship both Iran and Hizballah enjoy with other terrorist organizations of global reach, such as Palestinian Islamic Jihad and Hamas. Given the close relationship these organizations have with Iran, they can be expected to provide some operational support for such an attack. Both Hizballah and Hamas, it should be noted, are of particular concern inside the United States for the FBI. As Matthew Levitt noted in his recent book **Hamas: Politics, Charity, and Terror in Service of Jihad** (<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC11.php?CID=366>) (Yale University Press, 2006), an FBI analysis conducted in 2002 found that "fifty to one hundred Hamas and Hizballah operatives had infiltrated the United States." Because these individuals are likely to be graduates of terrorist training camps in Lebanon, they represented a potential threat to the United States.

In addition to the United States and Israel, other countries are also candidates for a terrorist attack from Hizballah or its surrogates. Turkey, due to the presence of Hizballah cells in the country, the presence of many Jewish institutions, and its proximity to Lebanon, would be a primary target. Similarly, Cyprus, Jordan, and Egypt are vulnerable due not only to the presence of Israeli targets on their soil, but to their opposition to and criticism of Hizballah in this conflict. And Europe, which also has a large number soft Jewish targets and entrenched Hizballah representation, would also be a potential target for attacks.

Implications for the Global War Against Terror

It is impossible to predict precisely how Hizballah and Iran will respond as events unfold in this conflict. Indeed, there are reasons Iran and Hizballah may decide not to play the terrorism card. These would include the negative impact such an attack would have on Iran's ability to resolve the dispute over its nuclear program; an inevitable crackdown on Hizballah's foreign resources by the targeted countries in the event of such an attack; and further isolation of Iran in the international community.

These reasons notwithstanding, the increasing escalation of the Israel-Hizballah conflict and the possibility of an Israeli ground invasion to disarm Hizballah make it imperative that security services in Israel, the United States, and their allies remain alert for such an attack. Preparations should include increased cooperation with other domestic and foreign security organizations; timely exchanges of information with these organizations on Hizballah and its allied terrorist organizations; and a heightened alert status for U.S. and Israeli diplomatic establishments overseas. These procedures should remain in effect throughout the course of the conflict and, if possible, long thereafter.

Also important in this regard are the actions of Syria and Iran. To this end, Washington should communicate to both

countries that military aid to Hizballah would have potentially significant consequences. For Syria, such consequences should include the possibility of political and economic sanctions for its violation of UN Security Council Resolution 1680 (which calls on Syria “to undertak[e] measures against movement of arms into Lebanese territory”); the likelihood of attacks on its vehicles if they enter Lebanon with military supplies; and the potential for attacks inside Syria on facilities used in the resupply of Hizballah. Similarly, Washington should be communicated to the Iranian leadership that Iran would be held accountable for any Hizballah terror attacks on Israeli or U.S. interests.

As is the case in most low-intensity conflicts, the current confrontation is unlikely to be resolved solely through military means. But no consensus has yet been reached about a politically viable strategy for ending this conflict. Until this occurs, Israel, the United States, and their allies must aggressively prepare for the danger that Hizballah may adopt as a component of its strategy terrorist operations beyond the current arena of conflict.

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