

Hizballah Opens a Second Front

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Brief Analysis

The capture yesterday of two Israeli soldiers (eight more were killed) in a crossborder raid by the Lebanese group Hizballah, as Israeli forces in Gaza continued to search for an Israeli soldier kidnapped last week by Hamas and to clear Qassam rocket launch sites, marked the opening of a second front in the war against Israel being waged by these two Islamist terrorist groups and their state sponsors, Syria and Iran. These developments highlight the potential for further escalation and illustrate the rising dangers posed by the emergence of an anti-Israel and anti-American military axis comprised of Hamas, Hizballah, Syria, and Iran.

Hizballah's Calculus

The Hizballah attack fulfilled a standing vow by the group's chief, Hassan Nasrallah, to obtain the release of three Lebanese prisoners still in Israeli hands. By carrying out the operation now and linking the return of the captured Israeli soldiers to the release of the three Lebanese and some ten thousand Palestinian prisoners, Hizballah sought to enhance its domestic and regional standing by hitching its wagon to the Palestinian cause.

It is unclear whether this gambit will succeed. Hizballah's provocation of Israel and the resulting loss of life and damage to Lebanon's infrastructure may generate increased resentment toward the Shiite militia among the Lebanese population. Indeed, just one day into the fighting, Beirut's airport has been damaged, likely ending what promised to be a good tourist season. Should Beirut become a locus of the fighting, the economic and human costs could be significant.

The Role of Syria and Iran

Hizballah clears nearly all major policy decisions with Iran's clerical leadership, and it is hard to believe that the Lebanese terrorist group would not have solicited Tehran's blessing and support before making such a risky move. Doing so at this time, moreover, serves Iran's interest by diverting attention from the ongoing diplomatic standoff over Iran's nuclear program and the referral of this matter to the UN Security Council.

Syria also stands to gain from the current crisis. By hosting a news conference this week for Hamas politburo chief Khaled Mashal in which he proclaimed himself the sole address for efforts to free captured Israeli soldier Cpl. Gilad Shalit, Syrian president Bashar al-Asad sought to underscore his country's centrality to any effort to solve this crisis, and his determination to use it to extricate Syria from its international isolation. Hizballah's gambit provides Syria

with another opportunity to advance this agenda.

Israeli Options

Israel's options should be seen in the context of its historical experience in dealing with past Palestinian and Hizballah crossborder attacks. Past responses have included:

- Major ground operations in southern Lebanon to dismantle the guerilla and terrorist infrastructure there, kill and capture large numbers of the enemy, and create a security zone along the border (e.g., Operation Litani in March 1978 and Operation Peace for Galilee in June 1982).
- Air and artillery strikes to disrupt the Hizballah infrastructure and displace large numbers of Lebanese civilians (e.g., Operation Accountability in July 1993 and Operation Grapes of Wrath in April 1996) to exert pressure on the Lebanese government to curb Hizballah.
- Air strikes and commando raids against elements of the Lebanese civilian infrastructure, including the power grid (April 1996 and several occasions since) and Beirut airport (December 1968), to exert pressure on the Lebanese government to clamp down on terrorists.
- Air strikes against Syrian air defense radars in Lebanon's Bekaa Valley (in April and July 2001) and against an abandoned Palestinian terrorist training camp northeast of Damascus (October 2003), to induce Syria to rein in Hizballah.
- Air strikes against Hizballah training camps and bases (e.g., the June 1994 air strike at Ayn Kawkab that killed and wounded dozens of Hizballah trainees and several Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps advisors; as a result of this operation, Hizballah more carefully dispersed its training activities, relocating some to Iran).
- The abduction of senior Hizballah officials (e.g., Sheikh Abd al-Karim Obeid, captured in July 1989) or other individuals with information about captured Israeli soldiers (e.g., former Amal security chief Mustafa Dirani, captured in May 1994). Both were returned to Lebanon as part of a January 2004 prisoner swap with Hizballah.

These efforts have generally produced modest, and in some cases mixed, results. The 1978 invasion of Lebanon provided temporary relief, but led to the subsequent creation of the UN Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) and the formation of a PLO ministate in southern Lebanon. The 1982 invasion destroyed the PLO ministate and provided renewed relief for residents of northern Israel, but also sowed the seeds for Hizballah's rise. Years of planning and preparation by Hizballah for such a contingency are sure to make any Israeli ground invasion a painful experience, but this may be the only way to root out the more than ten thousand katyusha rockets that Hizballah is said to have stockpiled.

Attacks on infrastructure designed to pressure the Lebanese government have generally been of limited, temporary value, and were sometimes counterproductive, feeding resentments that strengthened Hizballah's domestic standing. And because Hizballah has done much in the past decade to disperse its activities and limit its formal infrastructure in southern Lebanon, air and artillery strikes are likely to inflict only limited damage on its capabilities.

Snatch operations have likewise had limited deterrence value. And while Israel has never abandoned its dead or its prisoners, and is unlikely to do so now, it might opt to downplay this issue while expanding the scope of its military operations as a means of resolving a broader range of issues, including Hizballah's rockets.

Finally, there is the Syria option. Attacks on Syrian interests in recent years have been against largely symbolic targets—air defense radars in Lebanon and an abandoned terrorist training camp in Syria—not critical Syrian regime assets. Whether Damascus saw operations against marginal targets as evidence of a lack of Israeli resolve or as harbingers of worse to come is unknown. However, the long-term impact on Syria's support for terrorism was

limited. The possibility, then, that Israel will be tempted to target significant Syrian military assets in order to test the possibilities of coercive diplomacy will likely increase the longer the crisis drags on.

Conclusion

If Israel chooses to limit its response to Lebanon, it may prove difficult to reconcile its desire to secure the release of its soldiers on terms that deter future Hizballah operations, with its desire to avoid further escalation and to avert an outcome that further enhances Hizballah's image. Thus, the logic of the current situation is likely to push Israel in the direction of abandoning restraints, broadening objectives, and expanding the scope of its operations—perhaps to include military action against Syria—in order to end the crisis on terms that it considers acceptable.

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