

Is Hizballah Resuming the Offensive?

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Brief Analysis

After months of restraint following the double shock of U.S. military victories in Afghanistan and Iraq, Hizballah resumed action against Israel today, firing mortal shells and missiles at the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) along the Israel-Lebanon border. Changes in the regional geopolitical environment and recent statements by the organization's leadership suggest that Hizballah may also be preparing to carry out new terror operations, while the killing of a senior Hizballah military official last weekend by a car bomb may have provided the pretext for today's attack. Washington needs to closely follow these developments and engage in preemptive diplomacy to prevent new deterioration in the Arab-Israeli conflict, at a time when there is reason for cautious optimism on the Israeli-Palestinian track.

Hizballah's Restraint

About seven months of relative quiet have passed since Hizballah's last attack at the Israel-Lebanon border. There are a number of plausible reasons for this restraint. In particular, Hizballah may have sought to avoid:

- Becoming a target of the American war on terror.
- An Israeli move against Hizballah while the United States was preoccupied by its military campaign in Iraq.
- Pressure from its principle patrons, Iran and Syria, who were likewise trying to avoid U.S. pressure or military action.
- Taking steps that would undermine its domestic and international legitimacy and lead to demands that it be dismantled.

Fiery Rhetoric, Ominous Actions

On June 27, 2003, Hizballah secretary-general Shaykh Hassan Nasrallah stated in a speech marking the passage of fourteen years since the Israeli abduction of Hizballah official Shaykh Abd al-Karim Obeid that the organization intended to resume attempts to kidnap Israelis. It should be remembered that in July 2000, Nasrallah responded to an interviewer's question about Lebanese prisoners held by Israel by stating that if Israel did not free the prisoners, Hizballah would take actions compelling them to do so. Three months later, in October 2000, Hizballah abducted three Israeli soldiers from the Shebaa Farms sector of the Israel-Lebanon border. One month after that, Hizballah abducted an Israeli businessman (and colonel in the IDF reserves) that it had lured to Europe, apparently under false pretenses.

In his June 27 speech, Nasrallah also called on the Iraqi people to wage a jihad against U.S. forces in Iraq, and to use suicide bombers as a weapon. Two days later, in an interview that Nasrallah gave to the London Times, he accused the United States of engaging in terrorism. Nasrallah added that Hizballah would strike at American targets and interests worldwide if the United States attempted to eradicate the organization, and warned that Hizballah "would fight back if it felt its survival in jeopardy."

There are other indicators suggesting that Hizballah is resuming offensive action: these include the recent shelling

of the Israeli villages of Shlomi and Even Menachem by Hizballah antiaircraft batteries, where twice in the last month Israeli civilians have been wounded. Israeli officials claimed that the shelling did not coincide with Israeli overflights of Lebanese airspace, and were therefore intended to fall on civilian communities. (During the U.S. military campaign in Iraq, Hizballah was careful to fire only at Israeli aircraft, not at ground targets.) Hizballah also blames the United States and Israel for the August 2 assassination of Ali Hussein Sallah, a top Hizballah security officer in Beirut. Accordingly, Israeli Military Intelligence warned of a possible strike against Israel, and indeed in today's attack, Hizballah forces reportedly fired antitank missiles, light weapons fire, and mortars at several IDF posts, with shells reportedly hitting the towns of Masadeh and Majdal Shams on the Golan Heights.

The Geostrategic Environment and Hizballah's Activism

Nasrallah's statements and Hizballah's recent actions suggest that restraints on Hizballah's military freedom of action may be loosening, while pressure to act may be increasing. There are several reasons for this development:

- **Iraq.** During the recent war in Iraq, Hizballah did not dare to act against Israel due to fears of a possible Israeli or U.S. reaction. However, with American efforts to stabilize Iraq, revive its economy, and rapidly stand up an Iraqi government—in a process proceeding more slowly than perhaps expected and with U.S. soldiers being killed in Iraq almost daily—Hizballah may believe that Washington does not have the stomach for new military adventures (particularly with U.S. elections looming). As a result, it may believe that its military freedom of action has increased.
- **Syria.** Syria has yet to chart a clear course forward as it confronts the new postwar reality in the Middle East. Accordingly, Hizballah is receiving mixed messages from Damascus. On the one hand Bashar al-Asad has made some gestures in the direction of a rapprochement with Washington. He seems interested in resuming peace negotiations with Israel from the point at which they ended. He has also permitted leaders of the Palestinian radical organizations in Damascus to give the green light to the current Israeli-Palestinian ceasefire (hudna). And Asad has pulled more than 1,000 soldiers out of southern Beirut. At the same time, Damascus continues to support Palestinian terrorist groups, allowing them to maintain offices and training facilities in Syria. More importantly, there have been harsh verbal exchanges between Damascus and Washington. On July 28, Syrian foreign minister Farouq al-Shara was quoted in al-Hayat as saying that the "Bush Administration [is] the most violent and stupid [U.S. administration]...and it thinks its laws are sent down from heaven." In Syria's ambiguity, Hizballah may discern an opportunity to act.
- **Palestinians.** The renewal of Israeli-Palestinian negotiations, growing calls for Palestinian reform, the rise of Abu Mazen as prime minister, Palestinian efforts to crack down on terror and incitement, and improved economic and living conditions for the Palestinians all pose a threat to Hizballah's vision of "resistance" and "armed struggle" against Israel. Hizballah sees the Palestinian struggle as a means of extending its influence among Palestinians and in the Arab world, and it sees its ongoing effort to obtain the release of both Lebanese and Palestinian prisoners as a means of further burnishing its credentials. The release of Palestinian prisoners as a result of bilateral Israeli-Palestinian negotiations could thus deny Hizballah a crucial trump card.
- **Internal Pressures.** As an organization that has earned so much credibility from its active support for "armed struggle" as a means of eliminating Israel, Hizballah cannot afford to be seen as a passive cheerleader on this front for long. The negotiated release of Palestinian prisoners held by Israel serves to highlight Hizballah's failure to obtain the release of its own prisoners held in Israeli prisons. As a result, Nasrallah may see the abduction of additional Israelis as a way to further ratchet up pressure on Israel to obtain the release of Hizballah prisoners.

Pressure Points against Hizballah

Syria remains the paramount power in Lebanon, and as past experience shows, pressure on Damascus can influence Hizballah's behavior. Syrian policymakers, however, do not seem to believe that improvements in U.S.-Syrian

relations require the dismantling of those elements of the terrorist infrastructure belonging to Palestinian and Lebanese groups based in Lebanon and Syria. Rather, the Syrian tendency is to identify Israel as the main impediment to better relations between Damascus and Washington. If further resumption of hostilities on the Israel-Lebanon border is to be averted, Damascus needs to be convinced that President Bush is serious when he states that Syrian support for terrorism "is completely unacceptable" and that "states that support terror will be held accountable."

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