

Hizballah on the Defensive

May 6, 2003



Brief Analysis

Nervous about recent Middle East developments and major threats looming in the future, Hizballah is taking defensive steps inside Lebanon and stepping up its rhetoric against the United States.

Hizballah's Nightmare

In almost all of his speeches, Hizballah secretary-general Hassan Nasrallah has spoken about the pride that his organization brought to Arabs by forcing Israel to withdraw from Lebanon in May 2000. Now, however, the coalition forces have trampled on this pride: the Iraqi regime collapsed, and Baghdad fell without offering much resistance. Speaking on April 24, Nasrallah warned that "the most dangerous challenge now facing Arabs is the sense of hopelessness and stupor that has followed in the wake of Iraqi occupation." Indeed, on a variety of fronts, Hizballah is suddenly facing a new regional landscape that is inimical to its interests.

Lebanon. Certain Lebanese leaders have already begun to question seemingly accepted assumptions. For example, on April 25, Lebanese prime minister Rafiq Hariri stated that "the leaderships in Syria and Lebanon have enough wisdom to avoid a showdown and preserve their higher interests," adding that "it's time to sit down with the American administration and put all the cards on the table." For Hizballah, such statements indicate that the Lebanese government is challenging its legitimacy and rescinding its "free ticket" to take action against Israel.

Syria. One of the main issues in the new dialogue between Syria and the United States is the war on terror. On April 30, Secretary of State Colin Powell stated, "Saddam's downfall is a clear signal to Syria that the international community is about to lose its patience with countries supporting terrorism. . . . We have emphasized strongly our concern about continuing terrorist activities of Hizballah in the region and around the world." After meeting with Syrian president Bashar al-Asad, Powell called on Lebanon to send its army to the border with Israel and "end armed Hizballah militia incursions." Although it is difficult to get a response from Damascus on this issue, Buthaina Shaaban, the Foreign Ministry spokeswoman, did say that Asad "discussed all issues within the framework of achieving a comprehensive peace process." If decisive steps are indeed taken, Hizballah will view these developments as a sign that Syria may sharply restrict its freedom of action.

Iran. Hashmi Rafsanjani, the former Iranian president who remains a major political figure, stated on April 12 that "Iran's resumption of ties with the U.S. could be put to referendum. . . . [W]e should not be biased. We have lost many opportunities in the past, we have made inappropriate measures [regarding these relations]." For Hizballah, such a radical change in Iran's ties with Washington could mean a loss of support from Tehran.

France. Historically, France has been less harsh than the United States toward Hizballah. On April 30, however, Foreign Minister Dominique De Villepin called for Syria's withdrawal from Lebanon and deployment of the Lebanese army along the border with Israel: "Peace is possible between Lebanon and Israel. Resolution 425 has been implemented. No alibis should be employed to delay this peace, not even the Shabaa farms excuse." Such statements indicate that Hizballah is losing international legitimacy for its claim that it is confronting a continuing Israeli occupation.

Palestinians. The new prime minister of the Palestinian Authority, Mohammed Abbas (better known as Abu Mazen), has spoken out publicly about his intention to halt terrorist attacks against Israel (e.g., at the swearing in of his government on April 29). Because much of Hizballah's platform rests on support for Palestinian violence, this emphasis on nonviolence in the Palestinian government is a threat to the organization's legitimacy as a liberator.

Hizballah as "Hizb"

Hizballah emphasizes its identity as a legitimate Lebanese political party in order to improve its position in both Lebanon and the international arena. In order to establish this identity, Nasrallah and other Hizballah officials have met with leaders across the Lebanese political spectrum over the past month, calling for Lebanese political unity. Hizballah wants to persuade other political forces in Lebanon to remain silent about its policy of terrorist attacks against Israel. It also wants to demonstrate to Damascus its utility as a voice supporting Syria's role in Lebanon. For example, on April 22, Nasrallah stated, "The U.S. saying that the Syrian forces in Lebanon are occupying forces is not America's business."

Hizballah as "Allah"

Even as it casts itself as a Lebanese political party, Hizballah has also emphasized its role as a jihadist organization invoking the name of god. Using al-Manar, its satellite television station, the organization has succeeded in reaching the entire Arab world and sowing the seeds of hate. Most recently, Hizballah has called on Arabs and Muslims, Iraqis in particular, to resist the U.S. "occupation" of Iraq: "The people of Iraq will confront this occupation, but the way, means, time, and place they [the Iraqi people] will determine best." Nasrallah depicts Hizballah's struggle against the Israeli invasion of Lebanon as a model for Iraq. "We return to the master of martyrs Abu-Abdallah al-Husayn. . . . Tomorrow [in Karbala] will be like Lebanon on the first Ashura anniversary in al-Nabatiyah following the Israeli invasion in 1982. . . . A few months after . . . the Ashura of blood, steadfastness, martyrdom, and inspiration that declared the beginning of the end for the Israeli era in Lebanon which only started a few months before that."

Hizballah also tries to present its fate as linked to that of Syria, Lebanon, and the Palestinians: On April 22, Nasrallah stated, "Now Syria, Lebanon, and Palestine are one issue, one question, one cause, one objective." Three days later, he warned the United States not to attack Syria or Lebanon: "I am not saying we can prevent our enemy from entering our country; I'm saying that if they [Americans] do this they will pay a heavy price for it. . . . [W]e will fight to last breath, last drop of blood, and last bullet. They will literally be mauled." Three days after that, Hizballah claimed that it protected Syria from Israeli aggression: "South Lebanon will remain a field that protects Syria." Regarding the Palestinian issue, Nasrallah has rejected negotiations and called for more resistance: "The path of resistance in Lebanon and the path of resistance in Palestine are the correct paths, the paths of true religion, of right, glory, dignity, freedom, and liberation. . . . [T]hese resistance movements were established from day one on the bases of jihad, steadfastness, and sacrifice."

Conclusion

Given its anxiety regarding recent events in the Middle East, Hizballah will take defensive steps to reinforce its political role ("Hizb") inside Lebanon while continuing its rhetorical offensive against the United States as a means of emphasizing its religious, jihadist role ("Allah"). Soon, however, Hizballah will have to choose between these two roles. The best way to push Hizballah into choosing the political role is to insist on its disarmament, which is a key ingredient for a more stable and peaceful Middle East. Washington can achieve this goal only by making clear to Syria and Lebanon that it is in their interest to do so. The United States has in fact taken steps to pressure Syria. The day after returning from a trip to the Middle East, Secretary Powell hinted that although political and economic sanctions would be forthcoming if Syria took no action against terrorism, a serious crackdown would be rewarded by economic benefits. He added: "Obviously, I welcome what Mr. Asad said he was going to do. And I hope he, on

reflection, is willing to do even more. But the only thing that really counts is performance, not my temporary pleasure." If Powell follows through with this agenda, the prospects for success against Hizballah terrorism will be much greater.

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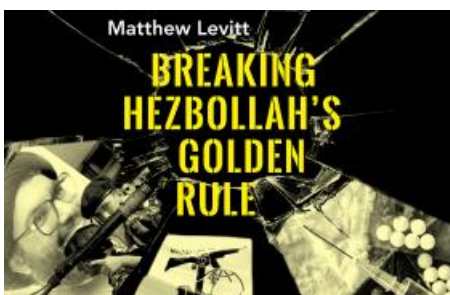
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