

Trying to Walk a Fine Line?

Hizballah's Stakes in the Current War

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Brief Analysis

Amidst the war in Iraq, the Lebanese group Hizballah has decided not to open up what could have been a "second front" by attacking Israel. This decision should not be mistaken for passivity, however. With the world paying scant attention, Hizballah is seeking to shape Arab public opinion against the United States. It is important to understand the underlying forces that drive Hizballah's campaign against the United States so as to better comprehend the organization's stakes in the Iraq war and its aftermath.

Stepping Up Anti-U.S. Rhetoric

Hizballah's animosity toward the United States is no secret. Its official website outlines its struggle with the West in general and with the "great Satan," the United States, in particular. The organization has stepped up its anti-American exhortations during the current Iraq crisis. On March 13, Nasrallah gave a speech in Beirut declaring that "the people of the region will receive [America] with rifles, blood, arms, martyrdom, and martyrdom operations. In the past when the marines were in Beirut we screamed in the southern suburbs 'Death to America.' Today, when the region is being filled with hundreds of thousands of Americans soldiers, 'death to America' was, is, and will stay our slogan." His words are chilling in light of Hizballah's track record: the U.S. government has determined that the mastermind of the 1983 killing of 241 U.S. Marines was Imad Mughniyeh, who remains in the upper echelons of Hizballah's leadership.

The organization's exhortations are not limited to its leaders' speeches. Over the last few weeks, Hizballah's satellite channel al-Manar has broadcast a music video whose lyrics proclaim, "America is the mother of all terrorism. Let the mother of terrorism fall. America is the army of evil. An invading aggressive occupying army. There is nothing left but the rifles. There is nothing left but the martyrs."

Hizballah's Fears

Hizballah's hatred of the United States is offset by fears that it might be the next target in the U.S.-led war on terror. As an organization that appears at the top of various lists of international terrorist groups, Hizballah is concerned that the United States will seek to dismantle its military capability in the aftermath of the war in Iraq. Even if the United States does not act militarily or diplomatically, Hizballah is concerned that Washington will tacitly permit Israel to attack the organization with impunity.

Hizballah also fears that a U.S. victory in Iraq will have a major impact on the overall direction of the region. For example, such a victory could trigger a new liberalizing dynamic of cultural and economic change throughout the Middle East, which could in turn undermine Hizballah's ability to gain support. Accordingly, Nasrallah recently declared: "[Americans] understood well that [Islam] poses for them a threat. Therefore, they aspire to involve themselves in the disciplines of culture and education" -- implying that any postwar U.S. efforts to transform Iraqi society will engender resentment. Moreover, Hizballah draws strength from the ruling radicals in Iran and Syria; to the extent that these radicals are put under domestic political siege by moderate forces, the organization's lifeline of

support is imperiled. Hizballah is worried that such pressure will cause its patrons and strategic partners to demand restraint, if not outright disarmament, in the wake of the Iraq war. In fact, Iran and Syria might eventually conclude that the best way for them to avoid coming under U.S. attack is by cutting off their client, Hizballah.

Such problems may hit even closer to home. Lebanese prime minister Rafiq Hariri has already publicly stated that Lebanon cannot be both Hong Kong and Hanoi -- that is, the country cannot be a springboard for economic dynamism while simultaneously serving as an ideological incubator for permanent confrontation with Israel. Although others in Lebanon are more supportive than Hariri, Hizballah must still weigh the prospect that Lebanon may eventually attempt to rein in the organization, thus imperiling its domestic popularity and international legitimacy as a resistance movement that forced Israel's withdrawal.

A U.S. victory in Iraq could also reinvigorate the Israeli-Palestinian peace process, which would be nothing short of disastrous for Hizballah. Such a development could deprive Hizballah of its pretext for confronting Israel, placing greater international pressure on the organization to alter its rejectionist stance.

The Best Defense: A Good Offense?

Because a U.S. victory in Iraq could bring about Hizballah's collapse even without direct confrontation with the United States or Israel, the organization believes that it must constrain the building of U.S. momentum in the Middle East by doing everything in its power to create a regional climate that is hostile toward U.S. intervention. Specifically, Hizballah has exhorted the rest of the Arab world to join the "resistance" against the United States and its coalition allies. Because Hizballah alone may not be able to create such a climate, the organization is hoping that other Islamists will put forth similar efforts.

Hizballah believes that there will be fertile soil for its anti-Americanism after the war. The organization is counting on the theory that protracted U.S. involvement in Iraq will generate the seeds of regional resentment. Hizballah already feels that it has several elements working in its favor, including Arab opposition to the war; the instinctive opposition of Islamic clerics; emotionally charged televised pictures of civilian deaths in Iraq and Palestinian deaths in the West Bank; and the projected difficulties of postwar Iraqi reconstruction. All of these factors could facilitate Hizballah's efforts to create hostile public opinion in the Arab world. The organization may also hope that the current crisis will transform Nasrallah from a local Lebanese leader into a pan-Arab and pan-Islamic leader.

Even if the United States is relatively successful during the war itself, a post-Saddam Iraq could present an intriguing opening that Hizballah may try to exploit. Iraq has been out of bounds to Hizballah during the Saddam Husayn years; his regime slaughtered tens of thousands of Shi'is. Yet, Hizballah may be hoping that the current fighting in the historically and religiously significant Iraqi holy cities of Karbala and Najaf could help to unite Shi'is throughout the region. Both Nasrallah and spiritual leader Shaykh Muhammad Fadlallah received their religious education in Najaf, and the former has already highlighted the city in public exhortations to continue the struggle against the United States. Although the great majority of Iraqi Shi'is may well spurn Hizballah, its radicalism, and its Iranian connections, the organization could find support from some in that community.

Conclusion

Hizballah is walking a fine line. Frightened of becoming the next target in the U.S. war on terror, the organization is steering clear of direct military actions that might provoke Israel or evoke U.S. enmity. At the same time, Hizballah hopes that the current Iraq war will drain American momentum and strip Washington of the motivation and capacity to use its victory to constrain the organization. Whether Hizballah will succeed in walking this line is far from certain.

Much depends on the stance that Washington takes. Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage has suggested that Hizballah is a greater terrorist threat than al-Qaeda; in September 2002, he stated, "Hizballah made the A-team of

terrorists, maybe al-Qaeda is actually the B-team." Similarly, President George W. Bush identified Hizballah as a terrorist group with "global reach" in his 2002 State of the Union address. At issue is what the United States will do about the threat posed by Hizballah, and whether Washington will pursue diplomacy, economic measures, military action, or some combination thereof.

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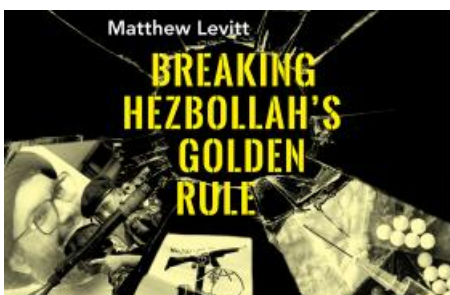
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