

Lebanese Military Deployment to the South: Understanding Syria's Defensive Tactics

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Brief Analysis

In recent weeks, Syria has begun to alter its military tactics in Lebanon as a direct consequence of U.S. policy toward Iraq. Even without U.S. forces firing a shot against Saddam Husayn, leaders throughout the Middle East have already begun to position themselves for an eventual U.S.-led victory and the reverberations to follow.

Anxiety about the Post-Saddam Era

Over the past month, Lebanese newspapers have been filled with articles discussing the deployment of the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) into the southern parts of the country and along the Lebanon-Israel border (except for the Lebanese side of the contested Shebaa Farms, where Hizballah forces are still in place). Lebanese president Emile Lahoud has described the deployment as a means of ensuring "that developments in the Iraqi crisis do not affect us in political or security terms." In addition, reports suggest that Syrian president Bashar al-Asad has supervised daily meetings with Lebanese leaders in order to strengthen his domestic position by resolving festering political issues, including various religious and ethnic grievances. For example, Asad has made concessions on Lebanese election laws in an attempt to gain popularity among the underrepresented Maronite population. According to the London-based Arabic newspaper al-Hayat, he is also expected to meet the Maronite patriarch before the latter's trip to the United States later this month.

The clearest evidence of Syria's tactical shifts lies in Hizballah's changed behavior. Just two months ago, Hizballah secretary-general Hassan Nasrallah, speaking from Damascus, described Israel as "merely a brigade in the U.S. army," implicitly suggesting that Hizballah would therefore target U.S. assets in much the same way as it targets Israel. In recent days, however, Nasrallah has changed his tune, asserting in a February 17 interview with DefenseNews that "Hizballah did not target any U.S. interests around the world," and "does not wish to blow up the region or lead the region towards escalation."

Syria's Survival Strategy

Taken together, these shifts point to a Syrian strategy based on the following principles: first, do not needlessly provoke the United States or its local ally, Israel; and second, be prepared in case a conflict does arise and Syria or its local ally, Hizballah, is drawn into it.

Clearly, Syria's main interest is to survive the looming U.S.-led campaign against Iraq and avoid being marked as the third state sponsor of terrorism -- after Afghanistan and Iraq -- to be targeted by the United States in the war on terror. Syria is a charter member of the State Department's list of state sponsors, and anxiety in Damascus about Washington's postwar agenda seems to have triggered several initiatives to reposition Syria as something of an ally, rather than an adversary, in the antiterror fight. For example, Syrian authorities, in cooperation with the United States, recently detained and interrogated Syrian-born German citizen Mohammad Helder Zammer upon learning that he had ties to suspected September 11 conspirator Mohammad Atta. Moreover, in recent days, the Syrian army has initiated a small redeployment of forces from Lebanon's northern Batroun, Koura, and Zgorta districts in a show

of goodwill toward the United States, UN, and European Union, each of which has issued repeated pleas for Syrian withdrawal.

Syria is also keen on avoiding confrontation with Israel. Damascus seems to have correctly assessed Israeli policy -- namely, that Israel would not initiate action along the Lebanese border in the midst of a U.S.-Iraq confrontation, for fear of undermining Washington, but that Israeli forces would certainly respond to an unprovoked attack by Hizballah. In the fog of war, such a response could involve far more than a simple reprisal raid, since Israel may decide that delivering a retaliatory knockout blow to a major terrorist organization would not cause too much consternation in wartime Washington.

Moreover, in a post-Saddam world, Syria would want a compliant Lebanon that would continue serving as its international advocate and tolerating, without much dissent, Syrian occupation. Such a relationship would be essential to the Syrian economy, which could lose an estimated \$2 billion in illegal trade and oil revenues in the event of war in Iraq. In order to survive such a war with its Lebanese protectorate intact, Syria must keep Lebanon calm and Hizballah silent; Damascus does not want to aggravate America's difficulties by reminding Washington that Syria is a regional troublemaker.

Why Deploy the LAF?

It would be a mistake to view the deployment of the LAF throughout the south as a sign of Beirut's compliance with UN Security Council resolutions to fight all terrorism within its internationally recognized borders. Such movement is merely another facet of Syria's desire to keep the region calm during the Iraq crisis. In military terms, the deployment is little more than a cosmetic change meant to give the impression that something is being done. Indeed, Syria ordered a similarly superficial LAF deployment in April 2002, when Washington warned that a failure to crack down on Hizballah attacks during Israel's Operation Defensive Shield would merit Israeli action. That deployment had little effect on Hizballah activity in the area, and the LAF units were rapidly withdrawn once regional anxiety subsided.

During the present deployment, the LAF has again avoided any confrontation with Hizballah, making no effort to prevent Hizballah's own military movements and showing no sign of forcibly disarming the organization. So far, LAF troops have done little more than set up checkpoints and patrols in southern Lebanon, separate from Hizballah's fixed positions and lookouts over Israel. Damascus still has not authorized LAF units to commandeer Hizballah positions across the disputed Shebaa Farms from Israel, essentially leaving the organization free to launch further attacks against Israel from this zone.

A true effort to prevent terror would require the LAF to disarm all of the terror cells in the south and take real responsibility for the border, including securing all fixed positions and preventing crossborder violations. For now, though, the most that one can expect of the LAF is to slow Hizballah's activities and report to Damascus on what the organization is doing. Although a day may come when Syria feels compelled to take decisive action against Hizballah (and against the organization's Iranian patron), that time has not yet arrived.

Implications for U.S. Policy

As regional pressures mount and Washington's attention is understandably focused on Iraq, there are at least two reasons why the Lebanon-Israel border deserves more than a passing glance. First, it is the one flashpoint where a showdown with Baghdad could transform into an Arab-Israeli confrontation. Second, in the wake of Saddam's fall, the United States would be in excellent position to take advantage of Syrian anxiety and strike a major blow in the war on terror by pressuring Damascus to disarm Hizballah and cut off support to the organization. Indeed, compelling Syria to turn on Hizballah would be tantamount to winning an antiterror trifecta: knocking out a group that Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage has described as part of the "A team" of international terrorism;

dealing a severe shock to Hizballah's Iranian patrons; and transforming Syria from part of the regional terrorist problem into part of the solution.

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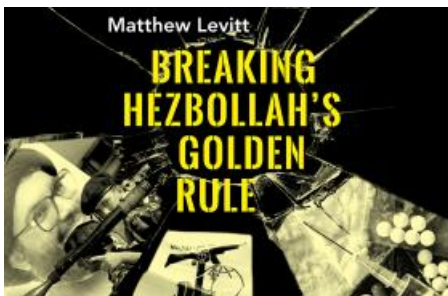
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