

Hizballah and the War on Terror

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Brief Analysis

Hizballah has not yet been made a clear target of America's war on terrorism. Recently, the organization has been taking advantage of the political space granted to it by this fact in order to frustrate both the war on terrorism and any plans for a campaign against Iraq.

The Aftermath of September 11

Hizballah's initial response to September 11 was caution and tense expectation. Its spiritual leader, Sheikh Mohammed Hussein Fadlallah, declared that no religion justified such action and that the suicide terrorists did not die as holy warriors. Nevertheless, he blamed the attacks on American foreign policy, claiming that it had created an atmosphere of hatred toward Muslims. He later described September 11 as a major earthquake and said that Islam is undergoing an unprecedented crisis.

Over time, however, Hizballah began to feel more assured in light of Washington's eagerness to court Iran and Syria as potential allies in the coalition against al-Qaeda, in spite of their presence on the list of countries supporting terrorism. Moreover, various press reports indicated that the United States was willing to acknowledge Hizballah's social and political role and "forget" its past attacks on Americans if it confined its activity to the internal Lebanese arena and ceased attacking Israel.

Hizballah became overtly aggressive after the United States began its campaign in Afghanistan. Hizballah secretary general Hassan Nasrallah took an arrogant, accusatory, and threatening stance against the United States, declaring that he was not afraid of the American campaign and warning the United States that it "will make a big mistake if it chooses our field for its forthcoming war against terrorism." This stance was strengthened by the deterioration of U.S.-Iranian relations and by Washington's inclusion of three Hizballah operatives on its list of most-wanted terrorists.

Hizballah's self-assurance is based on the firm commitment of:

The Lebanese government, which claims that Hizballah has no foreign dimension but is only a local political party leading the popular Lebanese resistance against the Israeli occupation of the Shebaa Farms. Consequently, the Lebanese have practically refused to freeze Hizballah's financial assets.

Syria, which is said to have assured Hizballah that the American military campaign will not target the organization. Nasrallah praised Syria's steadfastness and declared that the country is still a safe haven for jihad, despite the various pressures that the United States is applying to Damascus.

Iran, which continues to view Hizballah as its main ally in the Middle East, ready to maintain tension in the region and derail any peace process between Israel and the Palestinians. Tehran continues to supply Hizballah with arms, financial support, and military training.

On the strategic level, Hizballah sees its main task as fighting against the imperialist threat represented by the United States. Israel's struggle against Palestinian terrorism and its policies toward Syria and Iran are consistently

depicted by Hizballah as manifestations of an American conspiracy to subdue the Arab and Muslim people. Hizballah also portrays its active involvement in the Palestinian intifada as a means of giving the Palestinians the same sort of victory that Hizballah itself felt it achieved when Israel unilaterally withdrew from southern Lebanon in May 2000. For years, Hizballah has viewed the liberation of all Palestine (including Jerusalem) as the only way to 1) change the balance of forces between the various religious communities in Lebanon, and 2) end Syria's grip on the country, which Hizballah sees as necessary before it can achieve its ultimate goal: the Islamization of Lebanon.

Confronting Israel

By the end of November 2001, the Hizballah leadership, in coordination with Syria and Iran, seemed to decide on a policy of confronting Israel by actively supporting the Palestinian intifada, thereby escalating the tension in the region and obstructing future U.S. action. Several subsequent events support this conclusion:

Huge anti-American and anti-Israeli demonstrations in southern Beirut on December 14 (Jerusalem Day), which coincided with a visit by U.S. assistant secretary of state for Near Eastern affairs William Burns;

The involvement of senior Hizballah operatives in the January 2002 Karine-A weapons-smuggling incident, wherein Iran attempted to ship huge quantities of munitions to the Palestinian Authority, including 122-millimeter katyusha rockets (which have a range of twelve miles) and more than two tons of explosives;

Attempts in January and February 2002 to smuggle katyushas through Jordan to the West Bank;

On March 12, an attack by Hizballah-backed Palestinian infiltrators on civilian vehicles near the Israeli village of Shelomi, killing five civilians and one Israel Defense Forces (IDF) soldier.

A campaign from March 30 to April 13 against IDF positions in the Shebaa Farms area, during which the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon recorded the firing of 152 antitank missiles, 1,246 mortars, 28 katyushas, 11 surface-to-air missiles, and hundreds of rounds of small-arms fire. Nasrallah had previously mentioned the possibility of attacks in this area as a means of keeping Israel in a state of anxiety and disarray.

A Second Front?

Secretary of State Colin Powell visited Damascus in April 2002 in order to convince the Syrian leadership that it should help prevent a dangerous escalation in the region by restraining Hizballah. Fadlallah, however, depicted the visit as a part of a U.S. plan to prevent the creation of a "second front" against Israel, in preparation for the second phase of the war against terrorism. He stressed the need for devising a counter-plan in coordination with those states that were already opposing American pressures, especially Lebanon, Syria and Iran, all in order to foil the second phase of "America's war against Muslims and Arabs." Making a similar point in March 2002, Nasrallah asserted that Americans "now want to calm the other fronts so as to concentrate the efforts on Iraq."

Earlier this month, Fadlallah warned that "the coming stage is going to be full of challenges and it will witness many political and military changes, especially with the American plots for Iraq," which America "wants to take . . . over and destroy." As it became clear that the Bush administration was preparing a military option to topple the dictatorship of Saddam Husayn, Hizballah's leaders began to understand the serious danger such an option posed to the strategic alliance that they had forged with Iran and Syria in the early 1980s. Indeed, the future of the current regimes in Tehran and Damascus could become uncertain in the aftermath of the expected U.S. campaign against Saddam's regime.

Consequently, Hizballah's leaders may rely on the highly symbolic and volatile Israeli-Palestinian conflict to hamper any American-led efforts to confront regional radicals, be they terrorist organizations or rogue regimes. If a campaign against Iraq were initiated, Hizballah -- amply armed and with the active support of Syria and Iran -- could try to open a coordinated "second front" against Israel from southern Lebanon, in the hope that Arabs and Muslims

would press their leaders to become involved in a regional conflict against the United States and Israel. Hezbollah already has the military means, the motivation (i.e., the perceived threat of an American attack on Iraq), and the enhanced moral and political status in the Arab world to stage a massive, provocative terrorist operation well before any campaign against Iraq. Such provocation could drag Syria (albeit unwillingly) and other Arab states into a destructive regional war with Israel.

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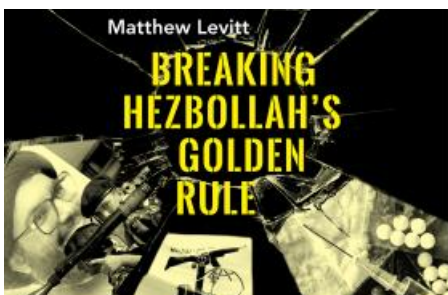
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