

# Hizballah's Kidnapping: An Opportunity to Test Bashar al-Asad

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Brief Analysis

## The kidnapping of IDF soldiers from the Israel-Lebanon border presents Washington with its first opportunity to test the intentions and capabilities of Syria's new and inexperienced president, Bashar al-Asad.

The capture of three IDF soldiers from the Israeli-Lebanese border last Saturday not only raises the danger of a third front for Israel--in addition to the upheaval in the Palestinian territories and the tensions with Israel Arabs inside sovereign Israel--but it offers the United States the first opportunity to test the intentions and capabilities of Syria's new yet inexperienced president, Bashar al-Asad.

## The Kidnapping as Part of the Asymmetric Warfare

The fighting that has taken place over the course of the last two weeks emphasizes the asymmetric nature of the interaction between Israel on the one hand, and its Arab citizens, the Palestinians, and the Lebanese on the other. Israel's well-equipped regular army, augmented by police forces, has confronted quasi-civilian forces with a limited arsenal consisting of stones, Molotov cocktails, and light arms. But the media has proven to be their most effective weapon. By using images of force, brutality, and seeming imbalance, they have effectively galvanized the Arab world, and rallied world public opinion behind them as the victim or "underdog." Side by side with the technological and the organizational asymmetry, an asymmetry of values is reflected in the differing willingness of each side to accept casualties in advancing its political goals.

Hassan Nasrallah, Hizballah's longtime leader in the fight against Israel, has a profound understanding of the principles of asymmetric warfare, incorporating them into the very foundation of his organization's methods of operation. On October 4th he said, addressing the Palestinians as his "brothers in the struggle": "The weak point of the Israelis is their love of life, but we in Palestine and Lebanon have a strong point ... we love martyrdom."

The common factor underlying each of the fronts which have emerged in the last two weeks is the understanding that Israel cannot be beaten in a conventional, symmetrical conflict, given its advanced military force, but this force

is less and less relevant in the recent asymmetric clashes. It is this tactic that Hizballah and the Palestinians see advancing them towards the goals they strive for.

## **Military Methods of Action: A Potential Escalation**

Israel is faced--not for the first time--with two possible modes of action to solve the current situation: the operational-military channel, and the diplomatic channel.

The operational-military channel consists of both direct actions to release the captured (such as Entebbe), and indirect ones. Direct actions are deservedly rare, since such an action requires very specific conditions and excellent intelligence, and still poses a very high risk factor. Assuming that such conditions do not exist in the current situation--partly because of Hizballah's high level of awareness--Israel is left with indirect actions, whose goal is exerting pressure on the captors. In the context of the current situation, possibilities for military action include bombing and reciprocal kidnapping directed against Hizballah or Syria, given that Israel perceives Syria as responsible for any violation whatsoever of the understandings along the northern border as the dominant power in Lebanon.

Indirect actions such as these involve complicated cost-benefit considerations, but such options cannot be dismissed out of hand: Israel may be forced to take such a course of action. One possible consequence of military activity in Lebanon is regional escalation and the regression of Lebanon into a war-zone. Such a scenario would have many losers, both among the direct participants (Israel, Lebanon, Hizballah, and Syria) and among the countries indirectly involved in the region, including Europe and the United States.

## **Diplomatic Methods of Action**

At the moment, it seems that the kidnapping serves the interests of Hizballah well. They are perceived both as a proud militant organization, mindful of its men in the Israeli prison, and as a symbol and a spearhead of the Arab struggle.

This leads to the conclusion that in order to make Hizballah forfeit its advantage or capitulate, there is a need to influence other players, such as Syria and Iran. The latter, although it has considerable influence over Hizballah, seems content with the current situation since it fuels the Islamic Revolution. Therefore, little would be gained from exerting diplomatic pressure on Tehran to release the IDF soldiers.

These conclusions leave Syria as the only player in the region that may repay any efforts spent in the current crisis, both now and in the future.

## **A Test for Bashar and an Opportunity for U.S. Policy**

This crisis constitutes a test of Bashar al-Asad's intentions. He may decide to support Hizballah, or at least maintain neutrality. For him, a measured escalation on the Israel-Lebanese border may be a welcome reminder to Israel that peace will not reign on its northern border until it returns the Golan Heights in their entirety to Syria. In addition, a certain degree of Lebanese instability and Israeli involvement could reduce or marginalize the voices recently raised in Lebanon against the Syrian presence. If these are his intentions, then the situation on Israel's northern front will deteriorate, forcing Israel to engage in military action against Hizballah and perhaps Syrian assets, even inside Syria proper. This crisis should, therefore, be viewed not only as a humanitarian dilemma but also a strategic one because if the situation deteriorates, it could escalate into a full-scale war.

On the other hand, Bashar al-Asad may be prepared to play a moderating role. After all, the kidnapping and its reverberations in the media strengthen Hizballah's power as a central actor in the Lebanese arena--a threat to Syrian hegemony. Bashar may be perceived as being led by events rather than leading them unless he takes charge of this crisis. By assuming a commanding role, Bashar can emphasize his hegemony over Lebanon, and tighten his grip

over Syria as well.

Furthermore, Bashar seems to regard the advancement of his economy as his main interest and the primary guarantor of his regime's survival. Playing not just a central but a positive role in this crisis may allow him to shortcut some of the problems he faces in gaining fuller access to the world economy. Herein lies an opportunity for the United States. By offering to work with Bashar on opening up Syria's economy, it may be able to persuade him to choose the path of moderation--if Bashar cooperates, then much could be possible down the road including the removal of Syria from the list of states sponsoring terrorism, U.S. monetary assistance and, perhaps, encouragement for U.S. investment in Syria and Lebanon.

Given Bashar's inexperience and the general uncertainty among observers about his intentions, it will be important to provide him with reasons to play the moderating role. He should therefore be persuaded through active diplomacy, with participation from the United Nations and countries such as Russia and Britain as well as the United States. An effort should also be made to dissipate objections that might be voiced in the Arab world in the event he chooses moderation.

If Bashar helps resolve this crisis, he will be seen as the "good guy" in the eyes of the world and the Israeli public. That would help him reach the negotiating table in a stronger position, whenever Syrian-Israeli peace talks resume. Everything considered, this crisis provides Bashar with an opportunity to cut Hizballah down to size, to advance his economic goals, to secure diplomatic support, and to strengthen his bargaining position in the Syrian-Israeli peace process.

## Conclusion

**T**here is no doubt that the Palestinian-Israeli front is where most diplomatic effort should be targeted. But decision-makers would do well to use this kidnapping as a test of Bashar al-Asad, who is not likely to have a better opportunity soon to prove his bona fides to the United States. Nor is the United States likely to have a better opportunity to test whether Bashar could be moved out from his father's shadow and toward a more moderate position, thereby advancing U.S. interests in a more stable and peaceful Middle East.

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