

# The Hizballah Kidnapping and the Potential for a 'Second Front'

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## Brief Analysis

**H**izballah's capture of three IDF soldiers in the disputed Lebanese-Israeli eastern Har Dov/Shebaa Farms border area Saturday marked the most serious outbreak of IDF-Hizballah hostilities since the Israeli withdrawal from southern Lebanon in May. The well-planned and executed ambush underscored the continued threat to Israel posed by Hizballah's highly-skilled guerrilla force, despite UN peacekeepers and Lebanese security forces now deployed in the south. While Hizballah's rhetoric about support for the Palestinian uprising in the West Bank and Gaza has been heated and virulent, the capture of the three soldiers has much more to do with Hizballah's and Syria's agenda in Lebanon than with wanting to open a second front against Israel in support of the Palestinians.

**Ambush Planned Months Ago** While the timing of the ambush provided Hizballah with the opportunity to show moral support for the Palestinian uprising in the West Bank and Gaza, it had, in fact, been planned months ago. Hizballah operatives as far back as June reportedly conducted limited infiltrations into Israel to gather intelligence on IDF capabilities along the border, mostly in preparation for a kidnapping. Deputy defense minister Ephraim Sneh warned in late June that a kidnapping would be used as a bargaining chip for Hizballah to try to win the release of Lebanese prisoners in Israeli jails. More recent information indicated that the kidnapping would be attempted in the disputed Har Dov/Shebaa area (for more background information on the disputed territory, [see PeaceWatch no. 256](#)). [\(templateC05.php?CID=1947\)](#) That area is a choice spot for such an operation due to mountainous terrain favorable to guerrilla tactics, and claims by the Lebanese government that the area is occupied illegally by the Israelis. The kidnapping operation was carefully planned and executed, including the use of a diversionary rocket and mortar attack on IDF positions, although several blunders by the 3-man IDF crew that was kidnapped certainly aided the Hizballah operatives. The kidnapping demonstrated the continued threat Israel faces from Hizballah, whose guerrillas have no intention of disbanding and face no pressure to do so absent an Israeli peace deal with Damascus and Beirut.

**Pressures to Open a Second Front** The timing of the ambush may demonstrate Hizballah's intent to open a "second front" against Israel in support of the Palestinian uprising in the West Bank and Gaza. This is further suggested by Hizballah statements strongly supporting and encouraging the "blessed intifada" by the Palestinians, and Hizballah's dedication of its kidnapping operation to a Palestinian boy killed during last week's fighting. Another indicator is Hizballah secretary-general Sheikh Hassan Nasrallah reportedly giving serious consideration to adding Palestinian prisoners to his demand for the release of Lebanese prisoners in exchange for the three IDF soldiers captured on Saturday. Doing so would further boost Hizballah's stature in the Arab World. Meanwhile, Fatah officials reportedly are in contact with Hizballah in an effort to enlist the group's direct support for the uprising.

Iran constitutes a likely source of pressure on Hizballah to directly support the Palestinian uprising. Tehran reportedly has orchestrated recent meetings between Hizballah and several Palestinian terrorist groups, which could be related to terrorist planning. In addition to meetings with Syrian officials in Damascus and Lebanese leaders in Beirut yesterday, Iranian foreign minister Kamal Kharrazi held discussions with Hizballah officials; the latter likely

dealt with Iranian efforts to facilitate Hizballah support for the Palestinian uprising.

**Countervailing Pressures** Whatever pressures exist towards opening a second front, Hizballah faces countervailing pressures and disincentives. First, more cross-border attacks, particularly along other areas of the border that are clearly delineated, could turn south Lebanon back into a battleground, and in the process undermine the "victory" which Hizballah has declared and celebrated since the IDF withdrawal. Second, provoking a major clash with Israel would result in a backlash by Hizballah's most important constituency-- the Shias of southern Lebanon, who are eager to attract foreign investment and aid to rebuild the South. Third, provoking a major clash would damage Hizballah's relations with non-Shia Lebanese as well. Lebanese Christians-- including a Lebanese parliament-member elect, Alber Mukhaiber-- have criticized the Hizballah kidnapping operation as an unnecessary provocation that could lead to a renewed cycle of violence.

In addition to domestic concerns, Hizballah will have to take into account the attitudes of both Damascus and Beirut to the idea of opening a second front. If Bashar al-Asad believes Israeli threats to hold Syria responsible for Hizballah actions in Lebanon, he has to worry about the prospect of major Israeli reprisal attacks against Syrian assets in Lebanon or in Syria itself. That development would pose a major challenge to Bashar, pressuring him either into escalation and thereby risking a major military defeat, or backing down and thereby risking a domestic backlash, particularly while the Palestinian uprising continues. It seems most likely that Syria prefers to leave the border situation sufficiently unstable as to pressure Israel into a deal on Syrian terms, but not to the point where Israel is provoked into large-scale military action. Meanwhile, Beirut is eager to rebuild its decimated economy and attract foreign investment and aid, none of which would be served by renewed armed conflict with the IDF.

**Outlook** On balance, evidence suggests Nasrallah sees Hizballah's interests not served by opening a second front with Israel. The best evidence of this is that Hizballah has not conducted any raids since Saturday's operation, and on Sunday turned away a group of Palestinians attempting to instigate violence at the Fatma gate. Moreover, Nasrallah in the past has made clear that the responsibility for "liberating Jerusalem" and the rest of "Palestine" is the responsibility of the Palestinians and not Hizballah.

Nasrallah, however, may agree to provide covert arms and training to Palestinian militants, perhaps to assuage the Iranians and to extend at least token support of the Palestinian uprising. However, given Hizballah's reluctance to see armed Palestinians taking the initiative in Lebanon, its aid is likely to be directed to Palestinian terrorist groups-- particularly Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad--operating in the West Bank and Gaza.

Probably the greatest threat to quiet along the Israeli-Lebanese border is not Hizballah provocations, but Palestinian violence perpetrated from the Lebanese side, as demonstrated during Saturday's clash that resulted in two Palestinians killed. As a UNIFIL spokesman recently noted, "all it takes is one man with a Kalashnikov or a rocket-propelled grenade--then we have a disaster on our hands." Short of the Lebanese government securing the border, which Syria is highly unlikely to authorize absent a peace deal with Israel, the security situation at the border will remain volatile.

◆ Steven Hecker is a visiting fellow at The Washington Institute.

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