

# Hizballah in Lebanon:

## What Next?

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Brief Analysis

**H**aving driven the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) and its proxy South Lebanon Army (SLA) out of Lebanon, Hizballah faces the momentous decision of what to do next. As the most capable guerrilla group operating in Lebanon, Hizballah's decision will have profound effects on the security environment not only on the Lebanese-Israeli border, but perhaps also in Israel, the West Bank, and Gaza. Hizballah leader Shaykh Hassan Nasrallah has revealed little about Hizballah's intentions in the wake of Israel's withdrawal from Lebanon, other than threatening to continue hostilities, citing Lebanese detainees in Israeli jails and Israel's occupation of the Sheba farms area near Mt. Hermon. He undoubtedly intends to keep the group's options open.

Hizballah's ultimate goal is to establish an Islamic state in Lebanon, although Nasrallah insists this goal will be pursued only through peaceful, democratic means. Short of this, Hizballah wants to obtain as much political power as possible within the Lebanese political system. It currently holds seven seats in Lebanon's 128-seat parliament and wants to take advantage of its sweeping propaganda victory in the wake of the IDF withdrawal to boost its electoral prospects in the parliamentary elections scheduled for August. Additionally, Nasrallah will carefully weigh Hizballah's choices against the impact on the group's ties with the two key external players in Lebanon-Syria and Iran.

**Retaining Its Guerrilla Force.** Hizballah's first likely course of action will be to retain its "Islamic Resistance" guerrilla force, with all of its arms. Shortly after the IDF withdrawal, the Associated Press quoted Nasrallah as stating, "As long as Israel threatens Lebanon every day with strikes, attacks and punishment, Lebanon has the right to maintain all elements of strength that can confront these Israeli threats." Nasrallah also signaled his intentions just prior to the withdrawal, stating that Israeli threats of retaliation for cross-border attacks "require a full state of [military] readiness to be maintained by Hizballah following the [IDF] withdrawal."

Maj. Gen. Amos Malka, chief of IDF intelligence, reported on May 30 that the arms flow to Hizballah from Iran continues—yet another clear indication that Hizballah has no intention of disarming in the near term. Retaining its guerrilla force and its armaments gives Hizballah the capability to retaliate for Israeli "provocations" in line with its self-appointed role as "protector" of Lebanon against Israel. Doing so suits Hizballah's domestic interests and—for different reasons—the interests of Syria and Iran.

**Not Initiating Cross-Border Attacks.** Hizballah is unlikely, however, to initiate cross-border attacks against Israel, despite Nasrallah's threats. Provoking Israel into major attacks on Lebanon would squander Hizballah's "victory" by returning southern Lebanon to a battleground, driving the recently returned residents back north, and turning Lebanese opinion against Hizballah and perhaps toward its main Shi'i political rival in southern Lebanon, Amal. Whereas past rhetoric about "liberating Jerusalem" could still resonate among some Hizballah supporters, and although Nasrallah openly supports Palestinian claims to Israeli land, he has stated in the past that liberation of "occupied Palestine" is the Palestinians' responsibility, not Hizballah's. Although the hasty IDF withdrawal and SLA collapse may have emboldened some Hizballah elements to continue fighting, Nasrallah commands a great deal of

influence over the guerrilla fighter rank-and-file and their commanders. A breakaway faction could emerge, intent on "liberating Jerusalem" with the backing of Syria and Iran, but it would not represent a serious threat to Nasrallah's authority.

The extent to which Hizballah has gone to curry favor with the Lebanese public and government since the IDF withdrawal further indicates that Hizballah is unlikely to risk its domestic position by provoking Israel. First, Hizballah is portraying the IDF withdrawal and SLA collapse as a victory for "all Lebanese," and not just that of Lebanese Shi'is. Second, Hizballah's leadership has prohibited a revenge campaign against Christians and suspected SLA members since the withdrawal. Acts of violence have been isolated, and Hizballah leaders have met with Lebanese Christian officials in the South to declare that their communities will be protected, resulting in praise for Hizballah from the United Nations and from some Christians. Third, Hizballah has not challenged Beirut's authority in the area, declaring that the government, and not Hizballah, will be responsible for security. Hizballah also turned over to the Lebanese Armed Forces at least some weapons it captured during the IDF and SLA withdrawal. (The group apparently has retained some of the captured weapons for display at a museum honoring its "victory.")

Aid to Palestinian Militant Groups. Hizballah is, however, likely to provide arms and military training to Palestinian guerrilla forces in Lebanon and to Palestinian terrorist groups present in the West Bank and Gaza. Nasrallah and other Hizballah officials are encouraging Palestinians to use violence, as opposed to negotiations, to force Israel to capitulate on Palestinian demands. On May 26, the Israeli daily Ha'aretz quoted Nasrallah as saying, "In order to liberate your land, you don't need tanks and planes. With the example of martyrs you can impose your demands." Hizballah has reportedly intensified its contacts with Palestinian militants recently, a less than surprising development given Hizballah's well-established ties with Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad. Aiding Palestinian militant groups in Lebanon and in the occupied territories would give Hizballah a low-profile outlet for continuing its conflict with Israel, without suffering the domestic consequences of direct responsibility for Israeli retaliatory attacks on Lebanon. This would also satisfy Syrian and Iranian interests in keeping the pressure on Israel.

Terrorism. Another option Hizballah may turn to as an outlet for continuing attacks against Israel is terrorism. Hizballah's terrorist wing, the Islamic Jihad Organization, has demonstrated its intent, on more than one occasion, to carry out a terrorist operation in Israel. The State Department notes that the organization also maintains established cells in Europe, Africa, South America, North America, and Asia. The probability of Hizballah terrorist attacks in Israel or against Israeli interests overseas will likely depend on the fate of Shaykh Abdel-Karim Obeid and other Hizballah detainees in Israel, and on the level of violence in southern Lebanon.

Policy Implications. The IDF withdrawal and current security environment give rise to several policy imperatives, all aimed at discouraging Hizballah and other armed groups in Lebanon from conducting cross-border attacks:

- The United States should support efforts aimed at developing the infrastructure and economic base in southern Lebanon. Timely commitments by international donors to help rebuild the South will serve as a confidence-building measure for the southern Lebanese and give them an incentive to keep the area quiet.
- Policymakers should support a bolstered presence by the UN Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) in southern Lebanon, as well as the deployment of the Lebanese Armed Forces as soon as possible to the South. A bolstered UNIFIL will also demonstrate the international community's endorsement of the Israeli withdrawal, making it more difficult for militant groups to justify cross-border attacks.
- Timely progress on the Palestinian-Israeli track could discourage Palestinians from attempting to adopt Hizballah's strategy of "armed resistance" in the West Bank and Gaza. Such a "Lebanonization" of the territories would result in a bloody conflagration that could quickly derail the peace process.

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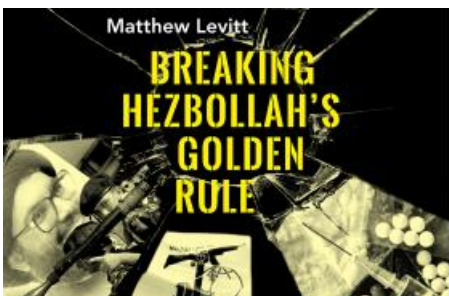
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