

From Sheba'a to al-Quds: The Evolution of Hizballah

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While international attention has been focused on the shift from diplomacy to violence in the Israeli-Palestinian arena, the "comeback" of Lebanon's Hizballah organization as an instigator of conflict has been, to some observers, a surprise. Following Israel's withdrawal from the "security zone" in May 2000, it was widely held that Hizballah would rest on its laurels and focus on its political/social agenda inside Lebanon. Instead, as recent events show, Hizballah has chosen to persist in its military strategy against Israel. Indeed, in contrast to the low-intensity conflict on the Palestinian front, Hizballah's actions have the potential to trigger a full-scale, inter-state war.

From Local Squabble to Pan-Arab Struggle After Israel's withdrawal from Lebanon, Hizballah effectively claimed victory over the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) and sought to translate the groundswell of support it enjoyed into a parliamentary victory in Lebanon's late summer elections. At the very same time, however, Hizballah's military wing, the "Islamic Resistance," continued to lay the groundwork for future military actions. The result was the operation on October 7 to kidnap three Israeli soldiers from Mount Dov/Sheba'a farms, a maneuver perfectly timed with the Palestinian-Israeli clashes. In order to place the operation in its widest political context, Hizballah leader Shaykh Hassan Nasrallah hurried to portray this action as advancing both Lebanese interests (i.e., the liberation of disputed Sheba'a farms and the freeing of Lebanese detainees in Israel) and the Palestinian struggle. All this, he said, was part of the "battle for al-Quds (Jerusalem)."

Focusing on the Sheba'a Farms was not a random decision. By infiltrating a parcel of land that Lebanon claims still to be occupied territory, Hizballah sought to provide itself with a legitimizing pretext for military action. The success of the operation, coming on the heels of Israel's withdrawal from Lebanon and at a moment when Arab states were talking (to the Arab "street") about support for the Palestinians was a huge boost for Hizballah. It strengthened the perception of Hizballah being at the forefront of the Arab struggle against Israel and completed the transformation of Nasrallah's image from a leader of a local territorial militia to a pan-Arab icon.

In fact, in the wake of the kidnapping, some Arab leaders (most notably Bashar al-Asad and Yasir Arafat) seemed to get swept up in the popular appeal of the Hizballah model of fighting Israel. To many Arabs, a formula for defeating Israel had, for the first time, been found: a long and violent asymmetric struggle, in which Israel's military power could not be brought to bear on the battlefield. The massive pan-Arab support for Hizballah was expressed in the October 21 communiqué of the Cairo Arab League summit, in which the Arab states (and especially Syria) for the first time formally designated the Sheba'a farms to be occupied Lebanese territory, thereby legitimizing Hizballah's operation. Emboldened by this political support, Hizballah struck again, killing an IDF soldier in the Sheba'a area on November 26. Despite press reports of a possible Israel-Hizballah swap of prisoners, Hizballah continues to lay the groundwork for future military actions.

This escalation has so far posed a difficult test for Israel. On the one hand, having laid down a red-line regarding cross-border attacks following the IDF's withdrawal, Israel's policy of restraint in the face of Hizballah actions has threatened to erode Israeli deterrence. However, heavy retaliation against Hizballah and its Syrian patron, especially at a time of Israeli-Palestinian violence, risks opening Israel's northern settlements to Hizballah fire and perhaps even a full-scale military confrontation along the northern border.

Hizballah's Conceptual Framework The ideas and motivations that drive Hizballah fall into three circles. The first circle revolves around Hizballah's survival. Nasrallah himself has said that Hizballah is defined by its "Jihadic identity," a philosophy of continual military struggle. Because of this, he refused to allow Hizballah parliamentarians to "go establishment" and join Rafiq Hariri's government; instead, he ordered his lead Hizballah's charge that Israel's withdrawal from southern Lebanon — recognized by the UN Secretary General as fulfilling the requirements of UNSC resolution 425 — was itself inadequate. As Hizballah's MP Mohammed Ra'ed said on December 4: "What justification will the Resistance have left, if Lebanon recognizes the Israeli withdrawal? We will continue to fight to liberate Sheba'a."

The second circle is Lebanon. The national context requires Hizballah to seek a balance between waging a struggle and maintaining popular support; Hizballah needs to keep up the fight to liberate Lebanon and free its prisoners but it also needs to avoid triggering a full-scale war, which would rain havoc on southern Lebanon and threaten Hizballah's principal support base. This is why Hizballah has taken such care to construct a broad Lebanese consensus regarding the Sheba'a farms and is so far careful to limit operations to that area.

The third circle is regional. Here, Iran is the leading factor, in ways more than just the provision of moral support, money, weapons and ammunition. Tehran's pervasive influence over Hizballah can be seen by the importance Hizballah gives to the liberation of Jerusalem, a goal which has nothing to do with Lebanese politics. In recent months, Iran has also upgraded its relations with Syria, making a special effort to strengthen its strategic alliance under new president Bashar al-Asad. The resurgence of the Iranian-Syrian axis has apparently affected Bashar's attitude toward Hizballah, too. Like his father, who viewed Hizballah solely as a useful and convenient tool in his proxy struggle against Israel, Bashar seems to believe that Hizballah's form of low-intensity conflict against Israel is a strategic asset for Syria — strengthening its negotiating position vis-à-vis the Golan Heights and providing a pretext for the continued Syrian military presence in Lebanon. But unlike his father, Bashar evinces real admiration for and less control over Shaykh Nasrallah. While war is clearly not in Bashar's interest, he seems more willing than Egypt's Hosni Mubarak, an October War veteran, to engage in warlike brinkmanship that could, through miscalculation or bravado, deteriorate into full-scale war.

For his part, Nasrallah seems emboldened by his new status as a pan-Arab hero, a status which itself must be maintained by continual military action against. This in turn feeds ever greater and more frequent actions under his direction. Such a dynamic virtually ensures an escalation of conflict.

U.S. Role: Preventing War Preventing deterioration on the Israel-Lebanon border that could lead to regional war is a high priority for all status quo actors in the region. The United States has a special role to play, given the negative impact war would have on the already-damaged U.S. standing in the region.

Toward Lebanon, three near-term policy changes could have a useful impact: 1) a clear declaration that Israel's withdrawal from the "security zone" fulfilled the requirements of UNSC 425, thereby weakening the consensus Hizballah enjoys in Lebanon; 2) establishing a direct linkage between commitments of U.S. assistance for south Lebanon reconstruction and the stabilization of the security situation in the area, including the deployment of Lebanese army troops and the dispersal of Hizballah forces; 3) public discussion of adding Lebanon to the list of "state sponsors of terrorism," given the safe haven it affords to Hizballah and other terrorist groups that lack even a pretense to legitimate military actions in the wake of Israel's withdrawal.

Syria, however, is the key. Engaging Asad soon with a "package deal" that threatens even tighter economic sanctions and political isolation should he pursue a confrontational approach, but promises a set of comprehensive political and economic advantages should he choose the path of stability and conflict-prevention may be a constructive approach. Given Syria's strategic partnership with Iran and the chance that the next Hizballah incursion could be the spark that provokes wider regional conflict, the United States cannot wait to see who in Damascus are the real winners and losers of the post-Hafiz al-Asad succession struggle before it acts. Engaging Bashar before he gets fully sucked up by the fervor of "the street" should be a top priority.

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