

The Hizbullah challenge and what lies behind it

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The roots of the current conflagration

There are proximate and distant causes to the current crisis between Israel and Hizbullah. Though Hizbullah's incursion into Israel's sovereign territory on July 12 – with the killing of eight and the kidnapping of two Israeli soldiers – is the immediate cause, the roots of the current conflagration stretch back in time across three decades. On April 22, 1979, four Palestinian terrorists from Lebanon landed on the beach in Nahariya in northern Israel and burst into a nearby apartment building. Their purpose, as their leader later explained, was to protest the signing of the Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty, and they protested by dragging Danny Haran and his four-year old daughter, Einat, down to the beach, where one of them - a Lebanese Druze named Samir Kuntar - shot Danny Haran and then smashed Einat's skull in against a rock with his rifle butt. Danny's wife, Smadar, survived by hiding in a crawl space in their bedroom with their two-year old daughter, Yael, but Smadar had to hold her baby tightly to prevent her from crying out while the terrorists were storming about the apartment – so tightly that she smothered her to death.

Samir Kuntar was captured and held in prison ever since. Securing the release of this Lebanese “prisoner of war” was the pretext for Hizbullah's decision on July 12 to infiltrate across the UN-certified border with Israel, launch a diversionary rocket attack on the village of Zarit and abduct two IDF soldiers to be used as bargaining chips. Why was the release of this non-Shi'ite member of a Palestinian terrorist organization so important to Hassan Nasrallah that he would risk all the consequences we have since witnessed? And what explains the timing of the operation? The answers lie in the gathering threat to Hizbullah's special status to Lebanon and the gathering international pressure on Iran because of its nuclear ambitions.

Hizbullah (The Party of God) was established in 1982 under the protective wing of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps contingent sent to Lebanon to help fight Israel. Its founders had long-standing personal ties with the leaders of the Islamic Republic and it benefited from military training and equipment as well as Iranian financial assistance, which it used to sustain a network of educational and social services that the Lebanese government was unable to provide, especially in the chaotic years of the civil war. Hizbullah was perceived by Iran as an extension of the Islamic

Revolution, and its message of Shi'ite self-assertion and uncompromising hostility to Israel, the United States, and the corrupting influence of western values fell on receptive ears among Lebanon's Shi'ite population. As such, it was suspect in the eyes of other Lebanese. But that suspicion was tempered by patriotic admiration for Hizbullah's role in fighting Israel's military presence in southern Lebanon. That is one reason why Hizbullah received an exemption when all the other Lebanese militias were disarmed at the end of the civil war in 1991. The other reason was that Syria – Iran's ally since the outbreak of the Iran-Iraq war a decade before -- controlled the rest of Lebanon and saw in Hizbullah a useful policy instrument of its own.

Hizbullah after 2000

Hizbullah's domestic Lebanese appeal began to erode more seriously in 2000, when Israel's withdrawal from Lebanon cut the ground out from under its main rationalization for keeping its own armed force. Nevertheless, continuing Syrian control of Lebanon and ongoing Iranian support (logistically possible only because of Syrian cooperation) enabled Hizbullah to undertake a massive military buildup, especially in the areas evacuated by Israel. After 2000, Hizbullah effectively created Hizbullahstan. The parallel government of this virtual state operated schools, clinics, welfare offices and media outlets, including al-Manar television station – the Party of God's media outlet entrusted to spread its message across the Middle East. This virtual state also had military command-and-control centers, bunkers and fortifications, a fleet of unmanned aircraft, mortars and armored vehicles, and 13000 rockets and guided missiles meant to deter Israel from responding to Hizbullah terrorist attacks (and perhaps to deter anyone from striking at Iran's nuclear installations).

Despite occasional rocket attacks or terrorist incursions into Israel, Hizbullah was essentially left alone by Israel, which had no desire to reengage in Lebanon once it had pulled out. But Hizbullah's project did come under growing criticism from other Lebanese as part of their growing opposition to the Syrian military presence – of which it was a direct beneficiary – and Lebanese opponents of Syria, especially Prime Minister Rafiq al-Hariri, were able to mobilize international support for their efforts. Those efforts culminated in the passage of UN Security Council Resolution 1559 in September 2004, which called for the withdrawal of Syrian forces from Lebanon, the disarming of all Lebanese and non-Lebanese militias, and the extension of Lebanese government authority throughout the country.

The first of these demands was met in 2005, though only after Syria was implicated in the assassination of Hariri and came under unrelenting international pressure and vocal demands to leave from all factions in Lebanon (except Hizbullah, which protested the Syrian withdrawal and further entrenched its image as a Lebanese proxy of foreign powers). But the other two demands were thwarted because of a combination of international indifference, Lebanese government impotence, and Hizbullah defiance sustained by Syrian and Iranian backing. True, Hizbullah was compelled to agree to a so-called "National Dialogue" about the other two demands of Resolution 1559, and in this dialogue it once again stressed issues like the fate of Samir Kuntar in an attempt to buttress the waning legitimacy of its "national" credentials. The "Dialogue," which one analyst has described as "the Lebanese way" of solving the problem, was going absolutely nowhere, and perhaps the impasse could have gone on a while longer. But on July 11, Iran's top nuclear negotiator left Brussels after refusing to respond to the demand of the group of six powers (the U.S., Britain, France, Ger-

many, Russia and China) that it halt nuclear reprocessing. On his way home, he stopped off in Damascus to coordinate plans with Syria.

What happened the next day now provides a chance to enforce UNSC Resolution 1559, disarm Hizbullah, dismantle its state-within-the-state, restore the central government's sovereignty and bring an end to the Lebanese anomaly – but only if misguided intervention does not thwart the action needed to make that possible.

Two conditions must be met to achieve that end:

1. the degrading of Hizbullah's military infrastructure and its image of power to the point where it can no longer threaten or defy, and
2. the containment of Syrian and Iranian ability to help it regroup, rearm and then ignite a new confrontation at a time and in circumstances of its (or Iran's or Syria's) choosing.

The first of these tasks is the primary purpose of Israel's military operation in Lebanon. In explaining the rationale for the operation, the Israeli government has usually referred first to the return of the kidnapped soldiers. However, Hizbullah's unprovoked aggression on July 12 is only the *casus belli* and while returning the two soldiers safely home remains an Israeli objective, the strategic aims of the current operation are much broader. Israel's attacks on Hizbullah military forces, weapons stores, logistical infrastructure, supply lines, and political leadership seek not only to weaken Hizbullah's offensive posture, but also to induce a fundamental strategic change. Hizbullah's defeat, so Israel hopes, will strengthen anti-Syrian forces in Lebanon (and elsewhere in the region) that oppose Iran's hegemonic ambitions and Syria's complicity in this design.

There are two good reasons therefore why the international community should share the goal of Hizbullah's defeat. Its disarmament as a militia will remove their shadow from Lebanese national politics and help Lebanon restore its sovereignty and independence. Its defeat will also cause a serious setback to Iran's and Syria's ambitions to influence the region.

The objective of downgrading Hizbullah as a way to help Lebanon's government reassert its authority and to weaken Iran and its radical policies in the area will not be achieved if the international community imposes a ceasefire while Hizbullah is still standing. Hizbullah's desperate pleas and pushes for a premature ceasefire are making inroads thanks to anti-American sentiment or due to the understandable emotional impulse triggered by the consequences of Hizbullah's insistence on using civilians as a shield for its military operations. Doing so would simply restore the status quo ante – the worst possible outcome of this confrontation. Along with the United States, Germany and the United Kingdom as well as others in the European Union appear to understand how vital it is to degrade Hizbullah's military power. It would be tragic if EU members with different agendas or narrower horizons were able to subvert their position.

Assuming that Israel can meet the first task, satisfying the second imperative will require a more active kind of involvement by the international community, especially by Europe. Even if Hizbullah is severely degraded and ejected from southern Lebanon, the Lebanese army is too weak and divided to assume sole responsibility for asserting government authority in that part of the country. Its deployment will need to be accompanied and perhaps preceded by a robust multinational force - - not a replica of UNIFIL or some other United Nations force -- with combat capabilities and a mandate to use them in the event that Hizbullah tries – as it probably will – to reestablish itself after

Israel withdraws. European Union members figure prominently on the fairly short list of countries able to provide contributions to such a force.

European Union members also figure prominently on the fairly short list of countries able to dissuade and, failing that, prevent Syria and Iran from resupplying Hizbullah.

In other words, Europe can make a positive contribution to a constructive and durable resolution of the crisis in Lebanon by doing the following:

1. Refrain from promoting a ceasefire before the conditions for a real transformation are met, especially the substantial degrading of Hizbullah's military capability and the discrediting of the ideological message of violence and hate that it and its Syrian and Iranian backers embody;
2. Help define a mandate for a multinational force willing and able to deploy in southern Lebanon and along the Lebanese-Syrian border in order to help prevent the rehabilitation of Hizbullah and the resurrection of Hizbullahstan with outside assistance;
3. Contribute effective military forces to the operation; and
4. Exercise diplomatic leverage on Syria and Iran to ensure their compliance.

All of these actions will depend not only on a sober analysis of reality but also considerable determination on the part of European governments. To ensure success, EU governments must invest political capital as well as material resources and possibly weather domestic unrest. Above all, injury or death of their servicemen in a situation where the threat to vital national interests may not be immediately obvious could jeopardize the entire operation. It is always more difficult to undertake actions of this sort than to issue Olympian declarations and preach to others about their obligations. But if Europe is serious about its stated intention to promote international peace and security, it will not be able to avoid making the sorts of commitments that are an inherent part of responsible international behavior.