

Hizballah in war and peace

Written by {ga=nicholas-noe}

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Four and a half years after Syrian troops were unexpectedly cajoled out of Lebanon, and more than three years after the end of a (nearly) "open" war with Israel, the Shi'ite movement Hizballah appears not only militarily stronger, as many of its enemies attest, but also politically and ideologically more secure, confident and, to a certain degree, coherent.



Indeed, as far as Hizballah is concerned, the March 14 movement that helped kick the Syrians out and that managed to maintain a narrow parliamentary majority in last summer's election (reportedly with the help of more than \$750 million in Saudi financing) has effectively ceased to exist. There is, quite simply, no domestic power right now that can substantially challenge or even "contain" Hizballah's independent arsenal--all the more so since there is also no credible external power to provide the kind of support that would be vital in such an effort.

Reconciliations and "thawings" with nearby Damascus are instead the order of the day, as Saudi and Egyptian power in the country retreats and regional differences sharpen around the unexpectedly swift decline of the "settlement camp" as a whole.

These external factors, of course, have greatly helped in solidifying and clarifying Hizballah's overall position. But as key theoreticians in the party, including its current head, Sayyid Hassan Nasrallah, have long argued, the main existential danger threatening the movement's twin goals of fully liberating Lebanese territories and hastening the demise of the Jewish state of Israel (setting aside the threat that a regional peace deal may pose) has always been the specter of internal division--not the army divisions that the IDF or the US Marines could conceivably muster up.

This is not to say, however, that there are no domestic vulnerabilities. There are, and, for the most part, they remain just under the surface as a spider web within which Hizballah still must operate.

Briefly, one would include on the list: the 2006 July War that ravaged the movement's Shi'ite base and raised the countrywide "reasonability test" for any future conflict (is Hizballah going to go to war for a good enough reason?); its use of arms internally last year that magnified its sometimes violent, sectarian aspect; its loss in the June 2009 elections, demonstrating the overconfidence and atrophy in Hizballah's vital political alliances; the "Shi'ite Bernie Madoff"

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scandal that sullied Hizballah's reputation for incorruptibility; and, certainly, the Iranian election unrest that damaged Nasrallah's increasingly tenuous claim to be heading a party that effectively synergizes reason and faith.

The problem here for Hizballah's opponents is that these vulnerabilities (of which there are certainly more) would have to be activated and organized around in order to create a new domestic alliance able to decisively undermine Hizballah's desire and ability to use violence. Unfortunately, as it currently stands, the potentially preponderant actor in Lebanon, the United States, appears unwilling and/or unable to invest in this particular course of action. This applies especially to convincing the Israelis to lend a critical hand by not objecting to sophisticated arms transfers to the Lebanese army, turning over to the UN small parcels of territory considered as occupied by the Lebanese government and shifting away from IAF over-flights that baldly violate UN resolutions and risk sparking another devastating war.

An internal debate may finally take place very soon in Washington over Lebanon policy--perhaps because policymakers have woken up to the idea that a war between Hizballah and Israel is more likely in the near term than a conflict with Iran. Yet deep divisions within President Obama's "team of rivals" combined with the political and intellectual vortex that Lebanon has long been for Americans, all lessen the chance that any unconventional thinking on how to approach Hizballah might actually be translated into action.

In the absence of a "peace process" then, and without an oblique, non-military strategy on the part of the US to tighten the political, ideological and moral spider web around Hizballah, the movement has declared that it is now even more certain another victory is in the offing--war or no war, as Nasrallah argued recently.

If Israel launches a preemptive strike because it discovers a "game-changing" weapons transfer, for example, or as a prelude to an attack on Iran, Hizballah will be domestically protected since its response will likely be deemed as justified by important segments of Lebanon's body politic. Even if Israel somehow resists attacking in the event of a strike on Iran, there are numerous other means by which Hizballah can become involved in an open conflict with the domestic backing it deems vital. Shooting down and/or capturing an Israeli pilot overflying Lebanon, for example, would likely entail a wide response by Israel but would be difficult for Hizballah's opponents to condemn, given the violation of Lebanese sovereignty.

Either way, Hizballah is supremely confident that it can adequately protect itself both politically and militarily in any new conflict with Israel. In fact, the overwhelming sentiment within the party seems to be that a confrontation is not only inevitable, but that when it comes it will finally lead to the total collapse of Israel. This means, above all else, that the relative quiet of the past few years has not brought restored Israeli deterrence, but instead the deferment of a conflict that Hizballah feels vastly more secure in waging.

But what if there is no new war? Here, too, Hizballah sees a strategic gain since it believes Israel has passed a turning point such that the Jewish state's perceived internal factors of decline (much discussed by Israelis themselves) can be decisively accelerated with the increasing application of pressure.

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Revenge for Commander Imad Mughnieh's assassination, then, does not have to be had in some kind of a spectacular attack and it does not have to be rushed. The revenge is ongoing and permanent, Nasrallah suggests, since as the missile capability of the "resistance axis" extends over and around Israel, fear multiplies the corrosive effects of occupation, demography, international missteps, political corruption and a military might that (supposedly) cannot sustain large casualties.

Of course, Nasrallah might very well be radically mistaken in all of this. The crucial point, though, is that both he and the party seem to firmly believe otherwise--a certitude and a righteousness mirrored by many of Hizballah's Israeli opponents who are apparently no less eager to put their own Dahia doctrine, as well as Nasrallah's "Tel Aviv doctrine" of mutual maximum destruction, to the test.

Sadly, if such a war does indeed come, as appears increasingly likely, one thing is certain--it will cost far more lives on both sides than the last round did.

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