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HIZBULLAH ATTACKS: MOTIVES AND IMPLICATIONS

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The Hizbullah shelling of IDF outposts on Mount Dov on January 23 shattered the relative calm on Israel's northern border that had prevailed since the last Hizbullah attacks in October 2001. This incident also shattered the belief (or hope) after 11 September that Hizbullah would lower its profile and refrain from any military action against Israel in order to avoid incurring the wrath of the United States, which views Hizbullah as a terrorist organization. This latest attack demonstrates that Syria is unable, and perhaps unwilling, to prevent Hizbullah from acting.

The terrorist attacks of 11 September intensified the strategic distress in which Hizbullah has found itself in recent years. There are three reasons for Hizbullah's dilemma. First of all, the end of the Lebanese civil war in the late 1980s forced the organization, against its will, to undergo a process of Lebanonization, that is, to abandon much of its original ideology, which focused on turning Lebanon into an Islamic Republic under Hizbullah's leadership. Thus, over the last decade, the organization was progressively transformed into yet another ethnic-confessional party competing with other sectoral parties for a slice of the Lebanese national pie. In order to distinguish itself from these other political parties and to retain something of its militant, revolutionary image,

Hizbullah stressed its role in the struggle against Israel.

The second challenge emerged when Israel withdrew from south Lebanon in April 2000. Ironically, Hizbullah's very success in forcing Israel to withdraw also threatened to make it irrelevant by depriving it of the "resistance and struggle" card in the domestic political competition. That explains Hizbullah's strategic decision to continue operating against Israel -- even if only in a narrowly-defined arena -- through periodic attacks on Israeli forces in the Mount Dov (Shab'a Farms) area. Hizbullah assumed (rightly, in fact) that limited action in this arena would not produce a general conflagration, which it did not want because of the heavy price that Shi'ites living in southern Lebanon would end up paying.

Thirdly, this context explains the implications of the events of 11 September. After the wave of terrorist attacks on American cities, Washington began to apply massive pressure on Syria and Lebanon to rein in Hizbullah. The U.S. made it clear that it accepted Hizbullah as a political party but would not tolerate further operations by the organization's military wing. Moreover, the Americans had not yet closed the file on the involvement of senior Hizbullah operatives, especially Imad Mughniyyeh, in the murder of American

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Marines in Beirut in October 1983 and in other terrorist acts against American targets.

The American pressure was a source of unprecedented concern to Hizbullah and to Syria and led to conjecture that Hizbullah, in response to Syrian pressure, had decided to suspend operations against Israel until American anger subsided. In retrospect, it is clear that Hizbullah's "time-out" was brief.

In launching its most recent attack, Hizbullah was obviously not seeking to provoke a general confrontation. If that were its aim, it would also have struck at other Israeli targets in areas which it also claims as Lebanese territory, and it might even have attacked civilian targets in northern Israel. Instead, this attack was probably an exercise in public relations intended to signal both Israel and the United States that the organization will not bow to threats or dictates from Washington and that it will persist in its acts of "legitimate resistance." Nor is it likely that Hizbullah defied Syrian directives, since there is nothing to indicate that Damascus ever ordered the organization to stop its actions against Israel. Above all, this was probably a signal to "domestic" audiences – in the Arab world and in Iran – that Hizbullah remains committed to its objectives.

But even if Hizbullah is not seeking escalation and all-out war, it cannot ignore the risk that its actions might lead to developments beyond its control. Following similar attacks in April and June of 2000, Israel responded by striking at Syrian military targets in Lebanon. Those strikes raised concerns about a general deterioration in the region. This time, Israel refrained from reacting, probably because the Hizbullah attack produced no casualties. But Israeli sensitivity has grown following reports that Hizbullah, with Iranian assistance, has built an array of missiles capable of reaching targets throughout northern Israel. So if a more lethal Hizbullah attack produces casualties in the future, Israel will almost certainly respond forcefully. And that could provoke Syrian or

Hizbullah counter-reactions that might drag the entire region into a confrontation.

The United States does not appear in a hurry to carry out its threats against Syria, Lebanon or Hizbullah. But further violence will eventually provoke an American response, as well. It is difficult to say whether that will be confined to political measures or will also involve military action. But one way or another, American pressure will inevitably push Hizbullah deeper into a corner. Hizbullah is in any case undergoing a process of protracted and gradual decline. That is largely due to the domestic realities in Lebanon. But the events of 11 September may well accelerate that decline. What remains unclear is whether Hizbullah will first be completely transformed into an ordinary Lebanese political party, or whether it does something, before that happens, to ignite a large-scale conflagration on the Israeli-Lebanese border.

This uncertainty is further compounded by the murder, one day after the Hizbullah attack, of former Lebanese Forces commander Elie Hobeika. Hobeika was the Lebanese Christian liaison with Israel early on in the civil war and then switched and allied himself with Syria. In Lebanon, he is best remembered for his role in the massacre in Sabra and Shatila, which he conceived, planned and carried out. But Palestinians were not Hobeika's only victims. He was also responsible for the death of dozens of his fellow Maronites, and of many other Lebanese, as well. Against this background, the Lebanese Government's attempt to blame Israel is an easy way to avoid facing the implications of Hobeika's death for a country still trying to rehabilitate itself only a decade after the end of a bloody civil war. A serious inquiry into the killing could reopen old wounds and undermine the precarious stability achieved with so much effort. Hobeika's death, like the Hizbullah attack, is therefore an ominous development for Lebanon itself.