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THE NEXT ISRAEL-HIZBULLAH EXCHANGE: THEATER OF THE ABSURD

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The recent Israel-Hizbullah prisoner exchange appears to be Act I of an ongoing drama. The next chapter, if it is played out, will also star Hizbullah chief Hassan Nasrallah, acting on behalf of the Government of Iran and with the backing of the Syrian and Lebanese Governments. But Act II will shine the spotlight on the symbiotic relationship between several state sponsors of terrorism and the Hizbullah organization that serves as their proxy. And it will also highlight the West's continued willingness to tolerate the ongoing exploitation of that relationship by the state sponsors, especially Iran.

In light of previous experience, the declared intention of Nasrallah and his Iranian patrons to seek a solution to the riddle of the missing Israeli navigator, Ron Arad, must still be treated with caution. But even if Nasrallah does come up with new information about Arad's fate in exchange for what he hopes will be a bigger payoff than he received in Act I of the exchange, it is clear that Nasrallah is only a pawn, however slick, in a typically crafty Iranian game.

Iran's role in all this is reflected in the arrival in Beirut of a delegation headed by Ali Akbar Muhtashampur, one of the founders of Hizbullah, and Hadi Khamenei, the younger brother of

Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei. Their presence at the lavish ceremonies marking the return of Lebanese prisoners symbolized Iran's honored status and the image it wants to project to the world as the party that worked diligently behind the scenes to make the deal possible. The high-level delegation was also meant to communicate the seriousness of Iran's intention to play a constructive role (along with Hizbullah and Syria) in the joint mechanism set up by German mediators to find a humanitarian solution to the problem of MIAs in Lebanon.

The public commitment and cautious optimism voiced by German mediator Ernst Uhrlau about the chances of sustaining the process and succeeding where his predecessor had failed raised hopes that this time, in contrast to their performance in the mid-1990s, the Iranians will honor their promises to end the suffering of the families of Arad and the four Iranian diplomats missing in Lebanon since 1982. But if that is the case, it is still unclear what brought about a change in Iranian policy on this matter. The answer may lie in the realm of strategy and geopolitics, that is, in Euro-American pressure on the matter of Iran's nuclear program and the presence of American forces around Iran's borders. It may also lie in domestic pressure to

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get this troublesome issue off Iran's international agenda.

Whatever the case, the protracted negotiations about the question of Ron Arad, many of whose details have already been made public, clearly indicate that the Iranians and their central partner in Lebanon, Nasrallah, have known about Arad's fate for a long time. Consequently, the effort they will ostensibly make now in order to justify the unreasonable payoff they are demanding is a fraud. For the brief period of time given to the "Humanitarian Search Mechanism" can only be an elegant "escape hatch" from the charge that they have deliberately concealed the Israeli airman for 16 years (since he was transferred to the Iranians by Amal dissidents in 1988); otherwise, there is no reason to expect that it will suffice after so many similar "efforts" have failed in the past.

The Iran-Hizbullah terrorism conglomerate has a long record of successfully hiding hostages, managing embellished crises, and waging psychological warfare aimed at maximizing Iran's political dividends. This game, in which Hizbullah functions as the operational arm for Iran's policy of extortion and serves as its fig-leaf, was first played out in 1984-1991. During that period, about a hundred hostages were kidnapped in Lebanon, most of them from Western countries. Some were held in Lebanon for several years in inhuman conditions, paid a heavy psychological cost, and were released when their countries paid a huge ransom; some died in captivity. The kidnapping chapter in Lebanon ended only when Iran forced Hizbullah to desist in return for Western support for a UN Security Council resolution condemning Iraq as the aggressor in the Iran-Iraq War. An attempt to include the release of Ron Arad in that package deal failed, and his fate has remained a mystery ever since.

In this theater of the absurd, the current effort to resolve the puzzle of Ron Arad is presented as a new play, though it stars precisely the same actors. Nasrallah is willingly cast in the lead role, but Iran is feeding him his lines. Iran itself, as is its wont, insists on projecting a fair and neutral demeanor even as it extracts the full price in return for undoing what were its own actions. Iran expects to get a hefty commission from Germany and France for its effort and good will in resolving the issue and through them will demand the release of terrorists it, itself, dispatched. The payoff most highly prized by Iran and Hizbullah is Kazem Darbi. According to the findings of a German court, Darbi was an Iranian studying in Germany who, on the orders of Iranian intelligence, recruited a group of Hizbullahis living there to murder Iranian Kurdish dissidents in the Mykonos Restaurant in Berlin in 1992. Other targets for release include one of the hijackers of TWA flight 847 in June 1985 who murdered US Navy diver Robert Stethem and was jailed by Germany, some of those involved in the murder of former Iranian Prime Minister Shahpour Bakhtiar, and five members of the Hizbullah cell active in a wave of murders carried out in France in the late 1980s on behalf of Iran.

If French and German leaders have to respond to demands to release terrorists convicted and jailed in their own countries, they will be helping Iran to reap its own profit from another Israel-Hizbullah exchange and to avoid punishment for its past actions. In return, they would do well to demand a drastic change in Iran's support of terrorism and to make it clear that if Iran refuses to comply, they will follow the precedent set in the confrontation over Iranian nuclear activities and push the European Union to join in American-led sanctions through the Security Council.