

Editor: **Mark A. Heller**

January 28, 2003

HIZBULLAH'S UNCERTAIN COURSE

Eyal Zisser

Moshe Dayan Center for Middle Eastern and African Studies

Following the announcement of a deal between Hizbullah and Israel to exchange prisoners and kidnapped soldiers, the leader of Hizbullah, Hassan Nasrallah, rushed before the cameras to celebrate his "victory." In fact, the press conference in Beirut marked, at best, a poor man's victory. And if people expected to see a jubilant, boastful, threatening Nasrallah, in the full flush of messianic rhetoric and ecstatic visions of unending struggle leading to the destruction of Israel, they were in for a rude surprise. Instead, Nasrallah was calm, restrained and, above all, apologetic and focused on the difficulties his organization will face in the future.

For the fact is that the deal reached between Israel and Hizbullah is very far from that to which Nasrallah had aspired and about which he frequently spoke in recent years. First of all, the return of the kidnapped Israeli and bodies of MIAs did not produce a wholesale release of thousands of jailed Palestinians and other Arabs but instead yielded a quite meager number, at least by the standards of previous prisoner exchanges. And not one of the released prisoners was truly significant for either Israelis or Palestinians. In other words, not one had "blood on his hands." Most were small fry whose release was in any case expected within a

few months. Secondly, contrary to his repeated declarations that there would be no exchange unless Israel freed all the Lebanese in its custody, Nasrallah was obliged to endorse an agreement that excluded, at least for the time being, one prominent Lebanese prisoner – Samir al-Kuntar. This was the same Kuntar whose release Nasrallah had specifically mentioned, only a few weeks before, as a condition for the deal.

After climbing far out on a limb, Nasrallah's readiness to climb back in is striking, and it is entirely due to the growing distress of his organization in the past year. This distress is a function of an emerging regional reality that severely constrains Hizbullah's freedom of maneuver as well as of internal Lebanese dynamics that also weaken the organization and limit its operating room.

Almost a year after the American conquest of Iraq, new rules of the game in the Middle East are becoming clearer. Notwithstanding American difficulties in Iraq, the United States is not swayed from its purposes, especially its struggle against terrorist organizations and radical regimes. In this struggle, the U.S. has already registered some notable achievements – not only in Libya, but also in Syria (as evidenced by Bashar al-Assad's efforts to resume peace

Published by TEL AVIV UNIVERSITY

The Jaffee Center for Strategic Studies & The Moshe Dayan Center for Middle Eastern and African Studies
through the generosity of Sari and Israel Roizman, Philadelphia

www.tau.ac.il/~jcss/

www.dayan.org/

negotiations with Israel). If Syrian efforts bear fruit, the consequences could be catastrophic for Hizbullah, because the convergence of Syrian-Hizbullah interests that nourishes Hizbullah actions against Israel would be shattered. The same holds true for Iran, which is much less enthusiastic than before about an ongoing confrontation with the U.S. Iran barely avoided a clash with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) that could have landed it in the same Security Council dock previously occupied by Saddam Hussein.

Both Syria and Iran are interested in calming things down in order not to draw American fire, and that seriously limits Hizbullah's freedom to act against Israel. For example, on 19 January, Hizbullah attacked an Israeli bulldozer that had crossed the Lebanese border, and the Israeli Air Force responded by striking at Hizbullah positions deep in southern Lebanon. But contrary to previous behavior, Hizbullah refrained from striking back, even though Israel's action was virtually unprecedented since its withdrawal from Lebanon almost four years earlier.

Hizbullah also faces domestic challenges. Constant criticism of the organization in the Lebanese press indicates that the public's patience is wearing thin. About a week ago, even al-Safir, which is closely linked to Damascus, joined in the fray and attacked Hizbullah for using its struggle to liberate Shab'a Farms as an excuse to avoid addressing Lebanon's internal problems, as if the travails of ordinary Lebanese are none of its concern.

Given these regional constraints and the domestic threats to his legitimacy, it is not surprising that Nasrallah rushed to wrap up a deal with Israel, even one not nearly as good as the one he had promised his supporters. With few assets other than a well-oiled propaganda machine, Hizbullah has acquired a status as a "regional power." But in the four years since the

Israeli withdrawal from southern Lebanon, its actions against Israel, however painful, have not produced 1% of the damage inflicted by the Palestinians in the same period. Nevertheless, the organization has managed to project an image of strategic if not existential threat to Israel. This explains the importance Nasrallah attaches to the way in which the public in Lebanon and in the wider Arab world perceives the deal.

To some extent, this deal is an achievement for Hizbullah, even if smaller than the one it expected. But it is a short-term gain. The day after the exchange is carried out, people will again question the ultimate purpose of the organization's activities. In Lebanon, it is eminently clear that Hizbullah will not liberate Shab'a Farms in the near future. And after the prisoners and bodies of kidnapped Israelis are exchanged, the organization will no longer be able to present this issue as the reason for and essence of its existence.

Hizbullah grew out of the Lebanese Shi'ite community and works primarily for them and on their behalf. The convergence of its interests with those of Syria and Iran led it to focus on the struggle with Israel. But that struggle has grown increasingly problematic in light of Lebanese domestic dynamics and the new region reality. The organization continues to portray itself as committed to the struggle, because that is absolutely vital if it wants to preserve its unique standing in the Lebanese arena and the wider Arab world. Nevertheless, reality may well bring Hizbullah to a crossroads sooner than its leaders expect. At that point, they will have to choose between two paths. One is to abandon the struggle against Israel and become an ordinary Lebanese political party, like all the others that only operate domestically and attract not the slightest interest elsewhere. The second option is to persist in the struggle, despite the price that is liable to entail.