

The Ayatollah, Hizbollah, and Hassan Nasrallah

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There is no doubt about Iran's deep involvement in Hizbollah activity. Iran founded the organization, constitutes its main source of inspiration, and sees it as the best success story of exporting the Islamic Revolution. Supplementing its strong ties with Syria, Hizbollah is attached to Iran at the hip. Iran supplies the organization with most of its weaponry, including the majority of its rocket arsenal, and offers financial support totaling tens of millions of dollars every year. Iran trains Hizbollah fighters at camps in both Iran and Lebanon, and since 1982 has maintained a Lebanon-based unit of the Revolutionary Guards, whose members also serve as military advisers to the organization. The Hizbollah leadership maintains regular, direct contact with the heads of the Iranian regime, consults with them on fundamental and ongoing matters, and coordinates its moves with them. Without Iranian military support, Hizbollah would not have dared to provoke Israel. Iran is building Hizbollah's military strength not only to bolster it vis-à-vis Israel and the Lebanese arena, but also to use the organization's military capabilities – primarily the rocket arsenal – in order to strike at Israel for its own reasons, if it sees the need to do so.

Nonetheless, there is no need to regard the kidnapping of two IDF soldiers, which led to the current deterioration in Lebanon, as an outgrowth of an Iranian initiative to ease international pressure regarding its nuclear weapons program. Despite its affinity with Iran, Hizbollah is not an Iranian puppet, and the two have not always seen eye to eye over political and operational issues. Hizbollah has its own considerations, which are not only related to its status as an important factor in the Lebanese arena, but also subject to Syrian influence. Therefore, one may assume that the move was, first and foremost, the result of a decision taken by the Hizbollah leadership.

Hassan Nasrallah had good reasons of his own to kidnap the soldiers. He had announced his intention months in advance, and had tried to do so in the past. From his perspective the timing was right for a move of this sort, with the IDF engaged in a major operation in the Gaza Strip and the north at the height of its tourist season. On the other hand, it is difficult to see what great gain Iran would derive from the operation: since the apparent expectation was that Israel's reaction would be limited, as in the past, the ben-

efit in postponing the preoccupation with the Iranian nuclear issue could also be expected to be limited. Therefore, one may assume that in the current situation, Hizbollah coordinated the kidnapping with Iran at least in a general manner and that Iran gave the organization its blessing, but did not dictate its moves.

Meanwhile, Iran is showing signs of concern about the complications and prolongation of the crisis, and its anxiety is well-founded. How the IDF operation will affect Iran largely depends on the results of the campaign and the arrangement that is reached. However, it is already possible to predict that if Israel achieves at least some of its operational objectives in Lebanon, Iran is likely to suffer damage in several ways. By its very response, Israel has enhanced its deterrent capabilities vis-à-vis Hizbollah: Israel has demonstrated that it is no longer possible to rely on its reluctance to engage in a second front, i.e., in Lebanon, or on its fear that the organization will unleash the rocket arsenal that Iran built for it. So far, the large-scale rocket attacks have hurt the northern residents, but have not weakened the resilience of Israeli society. A substantial part of the rocket arsenal has been eroded, due to both



the IDF operation and the use of the weapons. Hizbollah is being pushed back from the border, and may not be able to return to it.

All these constitute, first and foremost, damage to Hizbollah, but also to Iran. Iran regards Hizbollah's strength, especially its rocket arsenal and deployment on the border, as an important component in its deterrent capabilities vis-à-vis Israel. Until now, for example, Israel has refrained from punishing Iran for its increasing involvement in Palestinian and Lebanese terrorism, partially out of fear that Iran would respond by unleashing Hizbollah's rockets on northern Israel. This deterrent factor will not disappear, but if Israel succeeds in sustaining its operational achievements, Iran's deterrence toward it will erode because Hizbollah's threat to Israel will decrease. The IDF operation has also proven that there is a limit to Iran's ability to assist its protégé in time of need: Israel is causing Hizbollah significant damage, and Iran has no choice but to stand on the sidelines and offer verbal support while attempting to continue arms shipments. It is no coincidence that the Iranian regime is threatening to respond severely to Israel if it at-

tacks Syria, but it is not making any explicit threats in response to Israel's pounding of Hizbollah. It is possible, then, that in the future, Nasrallah will think twice about how much support he can expect from Iran in times of difficulty.

So far, the only gain Iran can point to from the present crisis is that attention has temporarily been diverted from the Iranian nuclear issue. On the other hand, it may emerge damaged in other ways. Hizbollah may be weakened in the Lebanese political arena. The international, regional, and internal Lebanese criticism of Hizbollah's conduct may in turn be leveled at Iran. Even more than in the past, Iran may be perceived as an entity that fans the flames in Lebanon, and one that must be curbed as part of a future arrangement so as to prevent a renewed flare-up in the region.

Must Israel seize the current opportunity and attack Iran, too, in order to deter it from rehabilitating Hizbollah and force it to reduce its involvement in Palestinian terrorism? On this matter, one must distinguish between two types of actions. In Lebanon, there are Iranian targets, primarily those related to the Revolutionary Guards and Iranian efforts

to strengthen and arm Hizbollah. These are legitimate targets as part of the fight against Hizbollah, and it is appropriate to strike them insofar as they are known. It is doubtful whether Iran would admit that they were hit because it categorically denies that it provides Hizbollah with military assistance. It is also reasonable to assume that Iran will make a supreme effort to rehabilitate and rearm the organization as much as possible in light of the damage and losses it has incurred, and Israel, aided by international entities, will have to do everything it can in order to disrupt this effort.

On the other hand, it would be a mistake to seize the opportunity to hit targets in Iran itself. Israel must now focus on achieving its operational objectives in Lebanon. Attacking some targets in Iran or for that matter attacking targets in Syria will not force either regime to loosen its ties with Hizbollah, and both regimes also have the ability to respond to Israel, for example, by means of missiles with ranges of hundreds of kilometers. At a time when Israel is examining how it can successfully conclude the fighting in Lebanon, it should not open another front in Iran or Syria.