

Hizbollah and the Morning After: Guerilla, Terror, and Psychological Warfare

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Any assessment of Hizbollah after the hostilities largely depends on the results of the war it is waging against Israel (or how they are portrayed), and these are still unknown. Despite this limitation, one can nevertheless point to some key objectives that Hizbollah's leaders would like to achieve, at least in the short term. Although the political arena is the milieu that will command the most attention vis-à-vis the results of the fighting between Israel and Hizbollah, this article will attempt primarily to assess Hizbollah's anticipated actions in the military-terrorist and cognitive-propaganda spheres. It is safe to predict that Hizbollah will want to achieve these goals regardless of the "objective" results of the fighting, playing down the death and destruction caused by its July 12 attack on Israel. Nasrallah, in true form, is expected to try and use his rhetorical talents to turn the pain of the blows suffered by his organization and Lebanon into an impressive, unprecedented military and fundamental achievement against the Israeli army.

Despite the tactical achievement it gained by kidnapping the Israeli soldiers, Hizbollah has scored a strategic failure by underestimating the intensity, depth, and timing of Israel's response. As an interim assessment of the Israeli attack, it is already clear that the or-

Lebanon, the destruction of its headquarters, and a severe blow to its centers in Beirut and Baalbek and to its supporters' civilian infrastructure. Even the public image of Nasrallah, the charismatic leader who was esteemed – at times excessively – for his abilities, has been tarnished, or at

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ganization has paid a heavy price in terms of loss of life among its fighters, the destruction of its military and civilian infrastructure in southern

Lebanon. His personality and status following the war will have a great impact on the organization's future conduct.

Hizbollah is a multifaceted organization with religious, social, political, and military institutions, and all of them together constitute its source of strength and uniqueness. Nonetheless, the organization's military-terrorist component is that which has earned it most of its publicity and has contributed greatly to the consolidation of its current stature in Lebanon. On this level, the organization operates through two branches: one deals with conventional, semi-military combat and guerilla fighting, and the other focuses on activating and directing terror activities.

In the "conventional" military and guerilla sphere, one can expect that the organization will do its utmost

to minimize the war damage. Even if forced to forego its outposts in southern Lebanon, it will try to maneuver in order to preserve its status as an independent military force and will certainly try to obstruct every attempt regarding its immediate disarmament. If it manages to preserve its unique status as the only armed militia in Lebanon, it will strive to re-equip itself, via Iran and Syria, with strategic weapons such as medium and long-range missiles and other military capabilities, or at the very

works, and lone Arab-Israeli cells in order to hurt Israel and preserve for itself and its Iranian patrons the ability both to influence and to thwart political moves in the future.

Hizbollah also has the option of conducting terror activities abroad against Israeli and other targets via a mechanism that specializes in such acts and whose infrastructure is deployed in various countries. The organization has not committed attacks abroad in recent years, especially because of a joint decision by Hizbollah

port of both Hizbollah and Iran.

A principal area in which Hizbollah (especially its leader, Nasrallah) specializes is that of psychological warfare. This component is a force multiplier in the organization's strategic arsenal, and Hizbollah makes wise use of it in order to reinforce its power image and present its limitations and failures as achievements. Nasrallah's polished and carefully timed appearances on the various TV channels, both Arabic and Western, and the use he has made of the organization's radio station, al-Manar, provide another concrete example of the importance he attaches to the media and psychological warfare as a tool in shaping public attitudes toward the results of Hizbollah's fighting. There is no doubt that this medium will play an important role in the organization's moves even after a ceasefire. If he survives, Nasrallah can be expected to show the target audiences that are important to him in Lebanon and the Arab and Islamic world how Hizbollah emerged the victor in this battle. He is expected to make it clear to his listeners that his organization fought on behalf of Lebanon in order to protect it from Israeli aggression, and to disregard the fact that he had no government or public backing for his actions.

Nasrallah will conceal the personal motives that led to the kidnapping, out of a desire for a prestigious tactical achievement intended to strengthen his image as a credible leader whose word is his honor, and make Israel accountable for the destructive results



least, hold on to those that are undamaged. Yet the focus on attempts to limit Hizbollah's conventional military strength is liable to shift its activity center to the terror sphere. Since direction and activation of terror are, by their nature, clandestine activities, it is harder to prove them and impose public accountability on their supporters and operators. Therefore, we can expect that following this current confrontation Hizbollah will continue to nurture and exploit with even greater intensity its ties with terror organizations, Palestinian terror net-

and Iran to avoid such activity in an atmosphere of intolerance toward international terror following 9/11 and due to their ability to further their interests vis-à-vis Israel within its borders. Nonetheless, it appears that Hizbollah will not find it difficult to renew its terror activities, if necessary. The organization has another option for perpetrating terrorist acts abroad that will distance it from incriminating evidence, namely by activating Palestinian elements such as Islamic Jihad or foreign Islamic competitors that in the past have enjoyed the sup-

that are evident throughout Lebanon and whose long-term damage has yet to be assessed. At the same time, he

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will play up the way his organization fought successfully against the IDF, how it captured the soldiers and prevented their forced release without receiving anything in return – even if he does not receive the price he demanded for them. He will emphasize the severe damage to the Israeli home front – his organization's success in causing hundreds of thousands of Israeli citizens living in the northern towns to flee, as well the heavy damage to the Israeli economy – as the proper way to deal with Israel. Nasrallah, who strives to lead Lebanon in the future and sees himself as part

of an Islamic struggle that transcends Lebanese nationality, is expected to wage a propaganda battle that will present the organization as a shining example of tenacious fighting and a role model for Islamic fighters worldwide. As part of this, he will glorify the determination of his fighters who are willing to sacrifice themselves in the finest tradition of *istishhad*, self-sacrifice for God, which has become the familiar pattern of action by jihadists around the world since Hizbollah presented it for the first time in the early 80s.

Hizbollah's ability to present the war as a victory and plot its future path will be greatly affected by the progress, duration, and results of the war, and particularly the survival of its current leadership, headed by Nasrallah and his senior military commanders, including the organization's chief of staff, Imad Mugniyah and his gang, who are among the veterans of the terror network run by the organization in the 80s and 90s. If it turns out that Nasrallah is the one who will conclude the battle on behalf of Hizbollah and navigate it through the thicket of internal political problems and international pressure aimed at

limiting its power, he can be expected to face an important test of his leadership. In contrast, the West, with the aid of pragmatic Arab countries, will also face a test of its ability to deal with a terror organization supported by terror-supporting countries, at least one of which is currently the target of an international effort to prevent it from developing nuclear weapons.

What thus ostensibly appears to be the prevention of Hizbollah's military-terrorist rehabilitation may un-

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fold as something whose importance exceeds the Israeli-Lebanese conflict and may have severe repercussions, both in the region and beyond.