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BREAKING THE LINK BETWEEN HIZBULLAH AND HAMAS

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Over the past two weeks, Israel has been enmeshed in conflict precipitated by kidnappings in the south and in the north. Those two tactical events have deteriorated into fighting with strategic consequences. The tactical successes of Hamas and Hizbullah have exposed Israel to extortion and it may well have to pay some price for its failures and for the return of the kidnapped soldiers. In this situation, Israel's objective is to turn tactical setbacks into strategic outcomes whose gains outweigh the losses. Understanding the objectives of the kidnappers and the organizations behind them may help lead to a well thought through strategy.

Hamas has found itself in a bind since it was elected to form the government of the Palestinian Authority and has been exposed to massive pressure by Israel, which refused to recognize its legitimacy, and by important international actors which have backed the Israeli position. At the same time, Hamas' domestic rivals, especially Fatah, have refused to come to terms with its electoral victory. The subordination of the security agencies to the elected government has been halting, and Fatah leaders have hoped for and even worked to promote Hamas' failure. That would prove their claim that Hamas is unable to govern or deliver on the promises of personal security, economic wellbeing and liberation from Israel that it promises the voters. So while the aim of the military wing of Hamas

that carried out the abduction was to register a concrete gain – the release of Palestinian prisoners – the aim of the senior political echelon is to exploit the abduction to register domestic political gains and establish an image as a pragmatic actor on the international scene. The Palestinian Prime Minister, Ismail Haniyya, is interested in gaining legitimacy for his Hamas government and reducing the domestic and international pressures to which he is subjected. Hamas help in securing the release of the captured soldier would enhance his stature as a leader and legitimate interlocutor.

On the northern front, since the withdrawal of Israel from south Lebanon in May 2000, Hizbullah has lost much of its international legitimacy and domestic base of support for continuing its military struggle against Israel. The last prisoner exchange, which entailed the return to Lebanon of Hizbullah's prisoners, left the release of Samir Kuntar, the Lebanese who took part in a 1979 attack on Naharia by Palestinian terrorists, as the last "national" justification for Hizbullah to kidnap Israelis. Moreover, the organization claimed that it had to preserve its military strength in order to defend Lebanese sovereignty against Israeli aggression and to liberate Shab'a Farms. These justifications failed to elicit much response in the broader Lebanese public and the organization found itself under growing criticism based on the

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fear that it might drag Lebanon into a direct confrontation with Israel over these marginal issues. For Hizbullah, the abduction of the Israeli soldiers provides proof of Hassan Nasrallah's credibility and has helped preserve his image as a leader who stands by his word. However, it may also turn out to be a pyrrhic victory. Nasrallah's motives in this action again expose ambitions that go far beyond the release of Lebanese prisoners.

Nasrallah does not hide his aspiration to entrench his stature as a Muslim-Arab leader and religious guide who wants to show Muslims around the world the right way to defeat and humiliate Israel by force. Not content to cultivate the myth of the victory that sent Israel packing from south Lebanon, he now hopes to transform Hizbullah and its path into models of emulation for all Muslims and to challenge the method of political negotiation as a strategy for restoring Muslim rights everywhere. Nasrallah has not abandoned his goal of establishing in Lebanon a Shi'ite Islamic republic under his leadership that would become an active revolutionary model for other Muslim peoples.

The exposure of vulnerabilities in local confrontations in which terrorist and guerrilla organizations have a tactical advantage sometimes necessitates the application of military force that will clarify the true relations of force between Israel and its rivals. By these means, Israel can impose on its rivals a ceasefire on terms that would obscure their tactical gains. But to achieve this, Israel needs to break the linkage between the two kidnapping episodes that Hizbullah, in particular, is trying to entrench.

Despite the semblance of a united Hamas-Hizbullah front based on shared interests, the interests actually do not completely overlap and sometimes even collide. For example, Hamas, despite its close links with Iran and Hizbullah, does not accept their authority or subordinate itself to foreign interests contrary to its own. And notwithstanding the glee of many

Palestinians at the successful kidnapping in the north, they surely do not ignore that Nasrallah may have moved up the timing of his own action in order to play the part of an experienced patron and show the Palestinians how to "do it" properly. Nasrallah's presuming to take the lead in negotiations on their behalf is also meant to endow him with more stature and seniority in negotiations, and a success for him could overshadow any gains that Hamas might expect from the release of prisoners. Indeed, partnership with Hizbullah could actually frustrate Hamas' hopes of gaining any recognition as a legitimate political actor after the fighting in the south eases. Thus, preventing any gain or reward for Hizbullah with respect to Palestinians prisoners might well be an interest that Israel and Hamas have in common. Indeed, the expressed readiness of Hamas spokesmen to resolve the issue of the Israeli soldier abducted by them within the framework of a comprehensive, long-term ceasefire (to include the end of Qassam rocket fire from Gaza) in return for the release of Palestinian prisoners could well be an additional common interest of the two sides.

On the northern front, Israel's central goal is to transmit the message that the Lebanese public will pay a very high and perhaps intolerable price for the glory and prestige that Nasrallah gained by kidnapping Israeli soldiers. A severe blow to Hizbullah's infrastructure, the enforced withdrawal of its troops from south Lebanon, the eventual disarmament of its militia (or at least the incorporation of its men into the Lebanese Army), and a drastic curtailment of its margin of political maneuver can constitute strategic gains that would obscure any claims by Nasrallah that Israel, by releasing Lebanese prisoners, had been forced to bow to his dictates.

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