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Hizbollah's Outlook in the Current Conflict

Part One: Motives, Strategy, and Objectives

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The fighting between Israel and Hizbollah has reached a critical juncture given Israel's widening ground offensive and the heated negotiations over an impending UN Security Council resolution to end the conflict. Israel's war on Hizbollah has catapulted the movement onto the world stage, earned it widespread respect throughout the Arab and Islamic world, and hardened its support in Lebanon. Understanding Hizbollah's outlook both with regard to the onset of the current conflict as well as its strategic objectives is crucial to assessing the likely course of events in the crucial weeks ahead.

Hizbollah's July 12 Ambush: Motives and Expectations Concerning an Israeli Response

After Israel's massive response to Hizbollah's July 12 ambush of an Israeli convoy, many commentators and ordinary Lebanese concluded that Hizbollah's decision to carry out the attack was either an Iranian-issued and Syrian-encouraged directive, aimed at igniting a war with Israel and dragging Lebanon into a wider regional conflict, or a reckless miscalculation that unwittingly wreaked havoc on the country.

The fundamental flaw in the first interpretation is that it does not take into account Hizbollah's similar abductions in the past which paved the way for prisoner exchanges with Israel involving hundreds of Lebanese and other Arab prisoners. Moreover, the party had dubbed 2006 "the year of the prisoners" (referring to the three Lebanese detainees whom Israel refused to release in the larger prisoner exchange of 2004) and did in fact attempt to capture Israeli soldiers in the preceding months for that very purpose. In Hizbollah's view, therefore, the abductions did not constitute a paradigm shift in its military strategy that necessitated an Iranian stamp of approval or warranted a massive Israeli response. From Hizbollah's perspective, the fact that Israeli soldiers were captured from Israel proper on July 12 did not represent a significant change in the rules of the game given Israel's routine violations of the Blue Line separating Israel from Lebanon. It is in light of these considerations that Hizbollah claims it anticipated a more customary Israeli response to

abductions: limited aggression, to be followed by a prisoner exchange. As admitted by the deputy-head of the party's Politburo, Mahmoud Qomati, Hizbollah "did not expect the response would be of this magnitude."

This acknowledgement may appear to corroborate the second interpretation. It would be an oversimplification, however, to take Hizbollah's admission of not forecasting such a military escalation as evidence of sheer miscalculation. Judging by Hizbollah's ability to absorb the shock of Israel's immense air power, its impressive performance in ground battles, and its sustained ability to launch rockets at Israeli towns and cities, Hizbollah does not appear to have been taken completely off guard by Israel's offensive. It is likely that the party had envisaged a large-scale Israeli response as one of many possible scenarios—though perhaps not giving it as much weight as others—and had therefore laid out the necessary contingency plans. As articulated by Hizbollah's Energy Minister, Mohammed Fneish, "when we make a decision we lay out plans for what the Israeli response might be, even the worst possibilities, and we are ready for them. We base our decisions on the worst possible outcomes."

In fact, there is evidence suggesting that Hizbollah must have foreseen an existential showdown with Israel at some point in the short to medium term. Before the outbreak of the conflict, the party had been engaged in the Lebanon National Dialogue talks, which deliberated over, among other issues, the fate of Hizbollah's arms under the aegis of proposals for a "National Defense Strategy." Some political forces belonging to the "March 14" Lebanese parliamentary majority, which enjoys close ties with the United States and France, had used these talks as an effort to implement the U.S.-French brokered UNSC Resolution 1559, which calls for Hizbollah's disarmament. According to Qomati, the party was fully aware that the talks were heading toward deadlock and believed the result would be that the United States would try to implement Resolution 1559 by means of an Israeli military assault on Hizbollah. In effect, Hizbollah was "prepared but not for the timing of the operation."

Hizbollah's Secretary-General, Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah, announced in July that the party had recently learned that the offensive had been planned for this September or October and that as such, it was fortuitous Hizbollah abducted the Israeli soldiers when it did: doing so hastened the war and hence deprived Israel of the "element of surprise." Qomati cites the Bush administration's consistent rejection of an immediate cease-fire as proof that the United States is orchestrating the war and that it would have been waged regardless of the abductions.

Hizbollah has thus gone beyond its conventional view of the United States' role as one of post-facto justification and legitimatization of Israeli actions, and now perceives Washington as the primary engineer of Israel's current onslaught. Talk by U.S. officials of turning the Lebanon crisis into an "opportunity" to forge a "New Middle East," coupled with the Bush administration's adamant refusal to accept anything less than the "conditions for a sustainable cease-fire," are interpreted by Hizbollah as U.S. dictates for both the instigation and prolongation of the current conflict. As expounded by Nasrallah in a speech last month, "the Israelis are ready for stopping the aggression....it is the United States which insists on continuing the aggression on Lebanon." In this connection, Israel is now seen as an "obedient tool" of a U.S. policy that seeks to redraw the political map of the region beginning with Lebanon and working its way through to Iran and Syria.

Given these factors, Hizbollah frames the current conflict as one waged by the United States and Israel against it, thereby, in its view, rendering its military objectives entirely defensive.

As declared by Nasrallah, “we did not want this war, but we are fighting it because it was imposed on us.” Although it appears that Hizbollah neither deliberately ignited a large-scale conflict that could engulf the entire region nor ignorantly miscalculated the likelihood of such a scenario, now that this war has been set in motion Hizbollah has not shied away from utilizing it in the service of its regional and domestic objectives, which are described below.

Hizbollah’s Strategic Objectives in the Current Conflict

Military Objectives

One of Hizbollah’s central objectives in this war is the creation of new definitions of power and victory that cannot be measured in quantitative or material terms. This process has been facilitated by three factors. The first is the very high, ultimately unattainable bar that Israel set for itself at the beginning of the conflict—eliminating Hizbollah—and Israel’s consequent need to change its goals thereafter. Second, and conversely, is the fact that Hizbollah did not clearly articulate any military objectives to begin with, save for its intent to secure a prisoner exchange at some point. It logically follows that a military victory for Hizbollah merely consists of denying Israel the ability to secure any tangible achievement. To date, Hizbollah appears to have succeeded insofar as Israel has not attained any of its declared military goals, i.e. the unconditional release of the two Israeli soldiers, the dismantlement or severe weakening of Hizbollah’s capacity to continue resisting Israeli forces, the neutralization of Hizbollah’s rocket capability, or pushing Hizbollah back to the Litani River. The third is the asymmetrical nature of the warfare—the Israeli Defense Forces’ vast size and strength compared to Hizbollah’s guerilla forces amplifies any sign of military weakness on the Israeli side and any indication of strength from Hizbollah’s side. These features of the conflict have enabled Nasrallah to declare that Hizbollah’s very survival constitutes a victory, as does what he has called its “steadfastness in front of the fiercest military power” and its “continuation with the confrontation.”

Hizbollah also regards itself as triumphant for having outperformed all conventional armies which have fought Israel throughout the history of the Arab-Israeli conflict. This includes Hizbollah’s ability to blunt the Israeli incursion, inflict losses on the Israeli army, and more significantly, take the conflict to Israel itself through rocket attacks. While these short-term goals are about Hizbollah’s own survival and status, Hizbollah also strives for longer term objectives which aim at shattering the myth of Israeli military invincibility. In a telling recent public speech, Nasrallah agreed with Shimon Peres’s assertion that the conflict was an existential one for Israel. Ruling out the notion of “liberating Palestine” and “destroying” Israel, Nasrallah construed Peres’s “life and death” statement as indicative of Israel’s fear of the ramifications of a Hizbollah victory on the future of Israel. As explicated by Nasrallah, “when the people of this transient state lose their confidence in their legendary army, the end of this entity will begin. This is because Israel is a state that was established for an army, and in Israel there is no army made to serve a state.” Hizbollah views the Israeli state as being subordinate to its military, which defines the very nature, identity, and foundation of the state. According to this line of reasoning, once this military is given its first taste of defeat, the foundations of the state will be shaken and Israel will begin to unravel.

Political Objectives

Another central objective of Hizbollah is to confront Washington’s “New Middle East” initiative and to frustrate the plan’s realization both in Lebanon and the region. In Hizbollah’s view, the only forces capable of stopping the U.S. plan are the main actors of the

strategic axis which encompasses Syria, Iran, Hizbollah, and Hamas. It is for this reason that the United States seeks to eliminate them from its path, beginning with Hizbollah in Lebanon. This perception has only been exacerbated by the U.S. government's framing of the current conflict as part of both the war on terrorism and President Bush's freedom agenda, as exemplified by Bush's recent contention that Hizbollah is "willing to kill and to use violence to stop the spread of peace and democracy," and his characterization of the war as "part of a larger struggle between the forces of freedom and the forces of terror in the Middle East." Hizbollah officials believe they have a "destiny to confront this accursed plan and to thwart the goals of this war," which includes stripping Lebanon of its "history, commitments, culture, and true identity to become an American-Zionist Lebanon."

Hizbollah's war with Israel thus becomes "an affirmation of the people's right to resist occupation and the rejection of the American imperialistic tendency," in the words of Mohammed Fneish. By blocking U.S. objectives in this war, Hizbollah will "obstruct the American plan" for the region "not in its aims but its results." Hizbollah's linking of the outcome of the current fighting with the success or failure of the U.S. Middle East plan is evinced by Nasrallah's depiction of the conflict as "surpassing Lebanon...it is the conflict of the umma," whose results will reverberate throughout the entire region. Given the immense popularity Hizbollah now enjoys in the Sunni Arab mainstream and among Islamist movements, the outcome of the war will have significant consequences not only for U.S. and Israeli goals in the region but also for the so-called "moderate" Arab regimes, whose substantial deference to the U.S.-Israeli line has been cast into sharper relief.

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