

## **Hezbollah's Current Strategic Dilemma**

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Looking at the bleeding Syrian ulcer, the deteriorating security situation in Lebanon, and Hezbollah's uncertain and precarious position amid sectarian divisions stretching from the Mediterranean to the Arabian Peninsula, it is hard to believe that the Party of God is really where it wants to be. Its continuing willful involvement in Bashar al-Asad's quagmire at a time when Iran's negotiations with the West about a return to international normalcy are bearing fruit threatens its strategic future and exposes it to the possibility of domestic political irrelevance.

Hezbollah's precarious strategic predicament has three important components. First, the latest Israeli strike against its bases on the Lebanese-Syrian border re-invited the speculation about a war with the party's greatest enemy, absent the real deterrence it used to have. Dubbed as a military operation against the party's bases to, probably, destroy missile stockpiles and, surely, disrupt potential missile supplies from Syria, the strike signaled that Israel still controls the extent, timing, and tempo of whatever future conflagration might ensue in the future. Hezbollah's announcement that it will respond "at the right time and place" - a statement usually used by the Syrian regime whenever Israel attacked Syrian targets - betrays limited, if any, options. Considering its deep engagement in Syria, the drain on its manpower and equipment, and its sensitivity to Iran's wishes, what is available as a response are tactical measures at best that would not achieve any strategic goals.

UN Security Council Resolution 1701, reached to end the Israel-Hezbollah war in 2006, pushed the party away from the Israeli border, thus allowing only missile strikes either from platforms tens of kilometers away or from areas controlled by UN troops in southern Lebanon, as Israeli officials have claimed. In either case, any such attack is sure to invite Israeli reprisals at the height of the party's engagement in Syria. The party could on the other hand organize a strike inside Israel, but that will be an ineffectual terrorist act and will still invite reprisals. It could also arrange attacks against Israeli soft targets worldwide, but that again will be limited and only invite further international condemnation, as well as retaliation at an inopportune time.

Second, as the Syrian crisis lingers and the sectarian fissures widen, Hezbollah's engagement on the side of the Syrian regime continues to be the greatest drain on its manpower, resources, and ideology. No definite and accurate figures are available on the party's casualties in the Syrian conflict; but anecdotal evidence and unofficial reports of funerals in Shiite areas of Lebanon speak of hundreds of dead fighters since the start of the party's involvement in Syria. Trained and experienced replacement cadres are a drain on the fabric of the party's social environment, and rotations are becoming more frequent and durations longer, as the party is thought to be able to field up to 10,000 soldiers. But what might become an unbearable burden is the toll Hezbollah's fight alongside the Syrian regime might have on its ideological underpinnings.

As a political and military organization claiming the mantle of fighting Israel and Zionism, Hezbollah seems to have forsaken

Jerusalem for Damascus, and a minority Alawite one at that. Its officials and propaganda arms have always laid the blame for the Syrian conflict on American and Israeli designs -helped by reactionary Arab forces, only to destroy the 'resistance.' The party thus saw that it had to protect its back by helping to prop up the Syrian regime. However, as a Shiite organization set up and supported by the Islamic Republic of Iran, Hezbollah dove head first in the sectarian quagmire the Syrian regime worked hard to create since the start of troubles in March of 2011. Whatever the party says today about its rejection of the Syrian sectarian divide and its emphasis on fighting a conspiracy, it will find it simply impossible in the future to dissociate itself from both its support of repression and its siding with a minority Alawite regime controlling a majority of Sunni Muslims.

Third, what over the next few months becomes of Iran's negotiations over its nuclear program and lifting international sanctions may prove to be the least liked scenario regarding Hezbollah's fortunes; depending, of course, on the extent to which the Islamic Republic is willing to trade with its regional cards. For such negotiations to succeed, and in addition to conceding on nuclear matters, Iran needs to ameliorate concerns about its role in the Gulf region, its sponsorship of Hezbollah, its support of the Syrian regime, its part of the responsibility for the sectarian divisions in the area, and its role in Iraq and the involvement of loyal Iraqi militias in Syria, to name a few. Moreover, and adding to the strategic mix in which Hezbollah finds itself, Iran might feel over-burdened in Syria if Russia were to concentrate its efforts on Ukraine in the coming period, as tensions between Moscow and the new Kiev, the European Union, and

the United States increase. In all of these areas, the requirements of Iran's foreign policy might force the party to at least lessen its commitment to the Syrian regime, if not abandon it. In that event, the party will lose everything it has so far stood for; only this time with a large number of new enemies and a few hundred dead soldiers.

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