

Hizbollah vs Israel: the coming clash

Contributed by Robert G Rabil
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Summary: A shifting balance of calculation in the middle east makes Lebanon's Hizbollah movement more confident in its strategy of "deterrence-by-terror" vis-à-vis Israel, says Robert G Rabil

President Bashar al-Assad of Syria, standing alongside his counterpart Mahmoud Ahmadinejad of Iran, made a notable remark at a news-conference [1] in Damascus on 25 February 2010 where the deepening of the two countries' relations was celebrated. "We hope others will not give us lessons when it comes to our region and history...We know what is our interest...We thank them for their advice."

The reference to the Barack Obama administration's attempt [2] to lure Syria from its alliance with Iran - reaffirmed only the day before by secretary of state Hillary Clinton at a Senate hearing - was unmistakable. For his part, Ahmadinejad addressed the backdrop of escalating rhetoric between Israel on one side and Syria and Hizbollah on the other; he warned [3] the "Zionist regime" against any military operation, which would spell out "its end forever." Hassan Nasrallah [4], Hizbollah's secretary-general soon joined [5] the two leaders in a show of solidarity, which in the Arabic world was referred to as "the nuclear meeting".

The strategy

These statements and displays [6] of solidarity should extinguish any wishful hope that Damascus is prepared to steer away from Iran in return for peace with Israel and recovery of the Golan heights. This, however, does not mean that efforts at peacemaking are stillborn. Rather, they reflect the near-completion of the Iranian strategy to realign the forces in the middle east, especially those confronting Israel. Lebanon [7] and Syria are the main pillars of this ambitious and dangerous strategy whose real objective is the disruption of the Arab-Israeli politico-military balance in favour of an Islamist-nationalist resistance [8] led by Iran and spearheaded in action by Hizbollah.

The Iranians appear to believe that by transforming the longstanding Arab-Israeli balance of power in the region into an asymmetrical balance of "deterrence-by-terror", they can deepen the impotence of the Arab moderate countries of Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Jordan into a complete paralysis - and thus press [9] their claim to lead the Muslim populations of the region. This belief carries the implicit assumption that these Arab states will avoid becoming complicit with any attempt by Washington or Jerusalem to punish Tehran (militarily or economically) for its alleged pursuit [10] of an armed nuclear capability.

The roots of this Iranian strategy lie in the events of 2000, a seminal year in the region's history. Three events - the collapse of Israeli-Palestinian peace negotiations, the military withdrawal of Israel from Lebanon, and the death of Syrian president Hafez al-Assad [11] - changed the political dynamics. Damascus came under pressure to redeploy in Lebanon and Hizbollah moved to become the real supporter of the Syrian regional order.

This shift in regional dynamics intensified with the United States-led invasion of Iraq in 2003 and the reluctant evacuation of Syrian troops from Lebanon in 2005. These events deepened Damascus's embrace of Tehran and Hizbollah as a means to bolster the Syrian regime at a time of domestic and regional uncertainty. It was under these conditions that the Syrian regime parted from its policy of circumscribing Hizbollah's power and conversely began to act both as a conduit and supplier of sophisticated weaponry to the Islamist party. The elite contingents [12] in Iran's Revolutionary Guards - the Jerusalem Force - trained Hizbollah's militants (then commanded by Imad Mughniyeh, assassinated [13] by Israel on 12 February 2008) in preparation for a future war with Israel (see Amal Saad-Ghorayeb, "The Hizbollah project: last war, next war" [14], 17 August 2009).

This war [15] took place in July-August 2006, following a Hizbollah raid [16] across the "blue line" into Israel's territory. Despite the heavy damage (human and infrastructural) Israel inflicted on Lebanon in the thirty-three-day war, Hizbollah proclaimed [17] the conflict its "divine victory" (see Zaid Al-Ali, "Whatever happens, Hizbollah has already won" [18], 9 August 2006). The sheer fact that Jerusalem was unable to cripple Hizbollah or stop it from firing rockets into Israel proper only hardened the will of Hizbollah and its Iranian sponsor to forge ahead with their plan to change the balance of power in the region (see Nadim Shehadi, "Riviera vs Citadel: the battle for Lebanon" [19], 22 August 2006).

Lebanon was a focal point in this strategy.

The shift

In the aftermath of the war, Hizbollah - shrewdly, gradually but forcefully - reduced the power of the opposition March 14 forces in Lebanon. In May 2008, the movement [20] effected a military takeover of Beirut; this led the March 14 leaders and vocal anti-Syrian figures, Saad Hariri [21] and Walid Jumblatt, to rethink their position [22] regarding Damascus and Hizbollah (see Zaid Al-Ali, “Lebanon: chronicles of an attempted suicide [23]”, 20 May 2009).

Saudi Arabia had set an example for Hariri by beginning a rapprochement with Syria, which culminated in a visit by King Abdullah to Damascus. The Saudi initiative - itself following diplomatic outreach [24] to Syria in September 2008 by France's president, Nicolas Sarkozy - paved the way for Hariri's own visit. The end of the Washington-led policy towards Syria was reflected in the remark of the state department official Jeffrey Feltman: "It was no longer Syria being isolated. It was the United States that was being isolated" (see “Israel and Syria Threaten War [25]”, Middle East Alliance, 4 February 2010).

The dramatic political realignment of Walid Jumblatt - from staunch opponent to defender of the Syrian regime and Hizbollah, all in the name of Arab nationalism - was a further severe blow to the March 14 forces. The Druze [26] leader's shift was a mark of his disillusionment and disappointment with the west as well as with March 14.

Jumblatt had overestimated both the George W Bush administration's eagerness to remove the Assad regime from power, and its readiness to use force to aid Lebanon's anti-Hizbollah, anti-Syrian political alliance. His bitter volte-face was catalysed during Hizbollah's seizure [27] of Beirut, when militants of the movement put him under house-arrest. The response was resounding by its absence: no American jet whizzed over his palace, no allied force came near his doorstep, no Lebanese Christians mobilised [28] in a show of support. Jumblatt's frantic calls to the Lebanese-American lobby were followed by a realisation that his political survival (and that of his son and political heir [29] Taymour) necessitated a complete reversal of roles.

In this decisive moment, Hizbollah both acquired a veto in Saad Hariri's cabinet and managed in the accompanying ministerial statement to have its role (and weapons) legitimised as a "resistance".

Hizbollah's evolving project was expressed by Hassan Nasrallah [30] in a speech commemorating Hizbollah's “martyrs” on 16 February 2010, which drew the qualifying framework for any future confrontation with Israel. He introduced the deterrent equation where Hizbollah would retaliate [31] proportionally to any Israeli aggression: "Tel Aviv for Beirut, and Ben Gurion international airport for Beirut international airport”.

The purpose of this strategic-parity deterrence [32] - or deterrence-by-terror - goes beyond altering the balance of power between Hizbollah (and by extension Iran and Syria) and Israel. It widens the theatre of operations between Israel and Hizbollah, highlighting the effectiveness of retaliation and including Syria in the potential calculus [33] of destruction. It is significant here that Syria's foreign minister Walid al-Moallem has confirmed [34] that in the event Lebanon was attacked, Syria would not stand by.

The choice

The retired Lebanese brigadier-general Amin Hoteit, commenting on Hizbollah's new strategy in the party's newspaper, stated that it faces Israel with two options: either use force and commit suicide, or don't use force and lose the military spinal-column. Hizbollah, it seems, is confident [35] about withstanding Israel's initial strike, trapping Israel in Lebanon and launching destructive missiles throughout Israel (see David Hirst, *Beware of Small States: Lebanon, Battleground of the Middle East* [36], Faber 2010).

What Iran and Hizbollah - and by extension Syria - are excluding is a pre-emptive devastating Israeli strike on all three of them. And if Iran is using Hizbollah as a deterrent-force against [37] Israel, then, given the heightened tension in the region against a backdrop of failed peace negotiations and frustrated talks with Tehran to resolve the nuclear standoff, Israel would have more incentive to strike at Iran (see Paul Rogers, “Israel's shadow over Iran [38]”, 14 January 2010).

More specifically, the Iranian strategy - as embodied in Hizbollah's deterrence-by-terror - is a recipe for a regional conflagration. In this respect, it would be foolish to think that Israel would either commit suicide by using force or relinquish its defence strategy and appear weak. That is why a clash between Israel and Hizbollah is inevitable.

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