

## Hizbullah turns up the heat on Beirut

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As large-scale military exercises go, this one was certainly unique, with the participants unarmed and out of uniform.

Then again, Hizbullah is no ordinary army; it is perhaps best described not as a militia that likes to carry out terror attacks, but a terror group that likes to dress itself in the trappings of a militia.

Hizbullah called this weekend's maneuvers, conducted in supposedly UNIFIL-patrolled territory south of the Litani River, its largest training exercise ever, involving thousands of fighters.

Hizbullah leader Hassan Nasrallah declared that the maneuvers proved to "both friend and foe that the resistance is totally ready to confront all kinds of Israeli threats."

The organization's internal opponent, Lebanese Prime Minister Fuad Saniora, contemptuously dismissed it as "an indoor simulation that was never implemented on the ground."

And IDF Brig.-Gen. Yossi Baidatz, head of Military Intelligence's Research Division, told the Knesset Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee on Tuesday that the exercise (or simulation) was carried out "firstly, to show [Hizbullah] is not intimidated by IDF exercises, and secondly, to display its power as an internal message to Lebanon."

The first reason hardly needs further explication; the second, though, does, as it is likely the more relevant motivation - and oddly enough, the one that should also arouse the more immediate concern on this side of the northern border.

The crucial backdrop to Hizbullah's muscle-flexing is the standoff over the Lebanese presidential succession. On one side, holding a slim majority in the parliament, are the pro-Western forces known as the March 14 Alliance - Sunni Muslims, Druse and Christians - led by Saniora and parliamentary majority leader Saad Hariri, son of slain former prime minister Rafik Hariri.

On the other are the pro-Syrian forces - Hizbullah, the Shi'ite Amal party and Michel Aoun's splinter Christian group - led by Nasrallah and President Emile Lahoud, who is due to leave office on November 24.

The two sides are split on a number of issues, but most crucially the stalled international tribunal investigating Hariri's killing two years ago - widely believed to have been carried out by Syrian intelligence agents - and the disarming of Hizbullah's forces, which exist outside the framework of the resurgent Lebanese army.

The support of the next president could be crucial in seeing those policies, which Lahoud has strongly opposed, eventually carried out.

Needless to say, neither Damascus nor Teheran wants to see that happen, and their proxies in Lebanon have thus far been able to postpone several planned votes for the presidency.

But last week, in a somewhat surprising move, the formerly pro-Syrian Aoun - who made a convenient but unlikely bedfellow for his Islamist political allies - suddenly held a series of meetings with the younger Hariri in Paris, with the blessings and protection of the French government, in an attempt to break the presidential deadlock.

Although Nasrallah publicly gave his blessing to Aoun's efforts, it couldn't have been good news for Hizbullah and its backers. Hariri and Aoun, according to Lebanese press sources, have reportedly been discussing compromise presidential candidates - such as Riad Salameh, the internationally respected governor of the Lebanese Central Bank - and aligning their own positions in a new government.

A possible Aoun defection to the March 14 Alliance, and the establishment of a new government not headed by a Damascus stooge like Lahoud, might create a political momentum to revive and carry on the aims of the Cedar Revolution to finally rid Lebanon of Syrian and Iranian influence.

Such a development, of course, would not go seriously unchallenged. No surprise, then, that just last week, Hariri publicly announced that Lebanese security sources had uncovered an assassination plot against him. Or that over the weekend in Istanbul, US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice held a sudden meeting with Syrian Foreign Minister Walid Moallem to deliver a firm, face-to-face warning not to meddle in Lebanon's internal affairs.

Or, of course, that Hizbullah has chosen now to hold its first large-scale exercise, on paper or in the field, since the 2006 war with Israel - especially since IDF flyovers of Lebanon, the purported reason for the exercise, have been going on for years without ever generating such a reaction.

It is worth remembering now that the Second Lebanon War began with Hizbullah's launching a cross-border attack on Israel, conveniently timed just days before an important hearing was to be held in the Hariri assassination tribunal. That investigation, like other reforms of the Cedar Revolution, was temporarily derailed by Hizbullah's conflict with Israel. The replacement of Lahoud with an independent president could be the most significant next step in that process since Syria was pressured into removing its troops from Lebanon after the Hariri assassination.

All the more reason, then, for us to be concerned right now that Hizbullah might once again be looking to change the agenda in Lebanon by provoking Israel into an action across the northern border.

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