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Turmoil in the Mideast: Militants

In Hezbollah Mix of Politics and Arms, Arms Win Out

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Just over a year ago, after the ejection of Syrian forces from Lebanon, the militant Shiite group Hezbollah found itself at a crossroads. On one hand, it seemed to be casting its lot with Lebanese politics, as its candidates struck an alliance with Christians and joined the Lebanese cabinet. Some even pointed to Hezbollah as a model for how a rogue militia can be co-opted and turned away from lawlessness.

On the other hand, Hezbollah clung to its weapons. Some believed it was biding its time, allying its interests with its sponsors in Iran and Syria.

With its cross-border attack on Israel last week, Hezbollah apparently made its choice.

Israel's shelling of Gaza provided Hezbollah with an opportunity to show solidarity with its Islamic brethren there.

But analysts pointed to other motives. Hezbollah needs to reassert its right to maintain its own heavily armed militia against ever louder domestic calls for its disarmament, and its actions burnish its backers, Iran and Syria, as they face Western attempts to combat and isolate them.

There is precedent for specific cooperation between Hamas, the Palestinian group whose exiled leader lives in Syria, and Hezbollah. In 2004, the two groups concluded an agreement to work closely to attack Israel more often.

This week's fighting also signals that Hezbollah and its allies are girding for a longer-term

confrontation. Hezbollah sees a joint American-Israeli attempt to reshape the region in the Western image, through the invasion of Iraq and the emphasis on democracy, and is determined to block it by asserting the supremacy of Islam.

Here Hezbollah's move serves the interest of Iran and Syria. Their relationship is so opaque that few would suggest that Syria or Iran can issue direct orders to Hezbollah. But the links are strong, with Iran providing substantial financial assistance and weapons, while Syria provides logistical help as well as political backing.

Since Israel's invasion of Lebanon in 1982 first spawned Hezbollah, or The Party of God, it has set out to prove that adherence to Islam alone will allow Arabs to prevail. Hezbollah used zealots who re-introduced the medieval practice of suicide attacks to the region. It attacked American marines in Beirut, prompting the withdrawal of American forces in the early 1980's, and eventually forced Israel to end its 18-year occupation of southern Lebanon in 2000.

After that, Hezbollah adopted a more public stance in support of the Palestinians as a way of keeping its militant credentials polished. Soon after the second uprising began against Israel in the occupied territories in September 2000, Hezbollah staged a cross-border raid to seize soldiers that eventually led to protracted hostage negotiations.

There are believed to be up to 3,500 active Hezbollah supporters, including some 300 hard-core guerrillas trained under the auspices of Iran's Revolutionary Guards who have maintained a presence in Lebanon almost since

the 1979 Islamic revolution in Iran.

Hezbollah virtually controls a swath of southern Lebanon, and the shadow of Iran looms large. In town after town in the south, the streets are hung with banners showing the pantheon of Iran's ruling ayatollahs. With generous backing from Iran, the group has financed a network of clinics, schools, farms, a construction company and myriad welfare organizations serving Lebanon's generally downtrodden Shiites.

Intelligence estimates drawn from recent Congressional testimony suggest that Iran subsidizes Hezbollah with \$100 million to \$200 million annually. But Hezbollah has also come to rely on financial support from Shiite expatriates in the West. Those funds far outweigh what comes from Iran, said Timur Goksel, a lecturer at the American University in Beirut who spent 20 years working in southern Lebanon as a United Nations official.

Sheik Hassan Nasrallah, Hezbollah's leader, asserted in a May 2005 speech that Hezbollah had more than 12,000 rockets, all of which were believed to be various forms of Katyushas provided by Iran. That coincides with estimates by Israeli and Western officials.

Until now, Hezbollah limited itself to using rockets with a range of 12 miles, but for the past several years Israeli officials have warned that Iran had provided more serious systems, including the 240-



millimeter Fajr-3 missile, with a range of about 25 miles, and the 333-millimeter Fajr-5 missile, with a range of about 45 miles. The Fajr-5 could reach the northern Israeli city of Haifa and areas even farther south. On Thursday, Hezbollah-backed Al Manar TV broadcast images of the new long-range missiles. It is unclear how many Hezbollah might have.

The conflict with Israel has shown off Hezbollah's new armory. Sheik Nasrallah, in a recording, announced that Hezbollah had used a makeshift drone to attack an Israeli warship off the coast of Beirut, killing an Israeli sailor; the Israeli Army said it was a missile provided by Iran. And early on Saturday, the group apparently struck Tiberius, deep inside Israel.

The use of the longer-range rockets has led many regional experts to conclude that Iran gave at least tacit approval for the current clash -- and it was not just a few rogue Revolutionary Guard advisers in southern Lebanon who decided to let rip with more powerful weapons.

"Would Hezbollah use a sophisticated missile that can hit Haifa without permission from Iran?" said Prof. Abbas Milani, chairman of Iranian studies at Stanford University. "I doubt it."

Iran's president, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, went out of his way to announce that any Israeli attack on Syria would be considered an attack on the entire Muslim world, which is another sign of at least a confluence of interests, if not outright cooperation among the three. In a speech in Tehran on Saturday, he also compared Israel's rationale for military action to the kind of "pretext" Hitler used to attack Jews.

Syria and Iran have an interest in proving that they are important regional players who cannot be pushed around, and having Hezbollah cause trouble in northern Israel is the most direct way of doing that, regional experts said.

Mr. Milani says there is a connection with the tussle over Iran's nuclear ambitions, now that China and Russia have suggested they might support referring the issue to the United Nations Security Council. Iran has never made a secret of its support for Hezbollah, and in

recent months boasted to visiting academics about providing it with missiles.

The Iranians "have been very clear that if push comes to shove, if the West tries to push them, tries to get tough with them, they can get tough back," said Mr. Milani. "They don't want to sit and wait. They want to show the West that there is a cost for moving against Iran."

As for the Syrians, President Bashar Assad appears to be sticking to his father's playbook. Whenever Hafez Assad, who died in 2000, sensed that as president he was being marginalized or ignored, he managed to stir up trouble in neighboring Lebanon so that the great powers would come knocking.

Other Sunni Arab governments fear an attempt by Iran to burnish its credentials in the region, reaching beyond its Shiite base to forge common ties with Sunnis. They see common goals binding Iran, radical Shiite parties in Iraq, the Assad government in Syria and Hezbollah and Hamas, who all oppose the West and its allies in the Middle East.

"This axis is trying to establish predominance over Arab public opinion and eventually expand its influence into other Arab countries," said one Lebanese official, speaking on condition of anonymity because he said it was impossible to publicly criticize Hezbollah when the country is under attack from Israel. "They have already reached out to the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt."

Hezbollah's more pronounced alignment with the Palestinian cause in the last six years has helped to provide the region's Shiites and Sunnis with a common goal, although deep suspicions remain.

One sector seemingly horrified by the attempt to exhibit a more assertive Islamic and Shiite presence in the region is in traditional Sunni states and Western allies like Egypt, Jordan and Saudi Arabia.

Jamal Dajani, who creates English translations of Arabic news shows for a program called Mosaic on Link TV, spends every day monitoring bulletins from around the Arab world.

While the satellite channels were providing around-the-clock coverage of the crisis on Friday, he said, it

was business as usual on the state-run channels, with soap operas and game shows running uninterrupted by any news bulletins from Lebanon or Gaza. The Saudi government also put out an unusual statement condemning Hezbollah's actions as "uncalculated adventures."

Sheik Nasrallah responded, showing just how Hezbollah, with its activist stance against Israel, manages to capture the imagination of an Arab public longing for anybody who will confront Israel and in the process claim a religious mantle that none of the other governments can come close to matching.

"And for the Arab governments, I will not ask you for your history," Sheik Nasrallah said, mockingly. "We in Hezbollah are adventurers, yes, and we have been adventurers since 1982. We did not bring to our country but victory, freedom, liberation, honor and dignity, with our heads held high."

The open question is whether Hezbollah has miscalculated, underestimating the ferocity of Israel's response.

That may prompt a backlash against Hezbollah in Lebanon -- or, if Lebanese casualties mount, may bolster its credentials as a fighter against Israel.

But Sheik Nasrallah is shrewdly rallying the faithful by evoking his party's claim to a holy mandate. "You are fighting the sons of Muhammad and Ali and Hassan and Hussein and all the prophet's household," he told the Israelis in a recorded message broadcast on the group's satellite television station, Al Manar, and on several Arab satellite news stations.

The sheik's black turban in his picture onscreen signaled his own descent from the Prophet Muhammad. "You are fighting people who have faith," he said.

Analysts noted his skillful use of religious imagery. "Hezbollah has not used that language in a very long time," said Amal Saad Ghorayeb, a professor of political science at Lebanese American University and an expert on Hezbollah. "It's a form of psychological warfare against the Israelis."

Although Hezbollah has been integrated into the Lebanese political system, he had to remind them

that Hezbollah is a regional player and an Islamic organization whose members are driven by a jihadi ideology, by a sacrificial ideology and “they don’t give a damn about the consequences.”

Sheik Nasrallah’s language plays into the Shiite tradition of being underdogs battling far more potent forces. Ali, Muhammad’s son-in-law, and Hussein and Hassan, his grandsons, were all slaughtered by larger Muslim armies in what is now Iraq. Those battles gave birth to the Shiite branch of the faith and inspired its cult of martyrdom.

In Lebanon itself, Hezbollah’s growing military and political power has frightened and angered Lebanon’s other sects. But it can play on Lebanese anger against Israel, which occupied southern Lebanon for 18 years.

“The problem for non-Shiite Lebanese has been Hezbollah’s weapons,” Ms. Ghorayeb said. “The problem for Hezbollah is the Israeli occupation. By now, people have realized that while Hezbollah got us into this, it is Israel that is our enemy.”

As the siege of Lebanon entered its fourth day on Saturday, Hezbollah’s radio and television appealed to Muslims outside Lebanon with reminders of past victories, and anthems speaking of “usurped” land. But the group also

sought to address growing frustration on the ground, emphasizing that the battle with Israel could only be won through sacrifice.

“Lebanon with its martyrs is victorious,” one video clip broadcast on Al Manar television announced. On Nour Radio, an announcer reminded listeners that “the patient one is the victor.”

Hezbollah’s actions this week defy the very central government of which it is a part. In Lebanon, analysts say, Hezbollah’s main priority is to maintain the weapons that gave birth to it, while also taking over the local franchise for pushing Syrian interests after Syria was forced to withdraw its forces last year in the wake of Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri’s assassination.

“It has become the essential instrument of Syrian maneuvers to prevent the Lebanese state from adapting to its newfound independence,” said Waddah Sharara, a sociology professor at the Lebanese University.

Thus it used its cabinet positions as well as its 13 deputies in Parliament to help block any attempts to remove President Émile Lahoud, widely considered a Syrian stooge; it undermined attempts to force Syria to demarcate the border and exchange ambassadors and it blocked economic aid that would have hinged on eliminating hundreds

of patronage jobs.

Even as thousands gathered in anti-Syrian demonstrations last year, Hezbollah set up its own pro-Syrian rallies and served as a spoiler. With the Syrians now gone, Lebanese politicians, driven in part by foreign pressure about Hezbollah, have been more concerned about Hezbollah’s potential to wreak havoc with its arms than with its ties to Syria.

Lebanese officials say the violence of Israel’s response will likely give Hezbollah the opportunity to argue with renewed vigor that it should be allowed to keep its weapons to be able to respond to any Israeli attacks.

“We will not stop the resistance,” said Hussein Haj Hassan, a Hezbollah member of Parliament in Lebanon. “We will not release them” he said, referring to captured Israeli soldiers, “until there is an equitable solution and we have no apologies. What is needed now is for the loss of life to be stopped.”

But some analysts expect Hezbollah to pay a heavy price on the ground once the dust settles. “There is a huge split in the Lebanese street that is hurting Hezbollah’s interests,” said Hazim Amin, a Shiite columnist with the pan-Arab daily Al Hayat. “More than half the street is not happy with what Hezbollah did and that is only going to increase, and they will have to answer to that.”