



No Good Outcomes For Israel

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"We who defeated the Israelis will also defeat the terrorists," a Hezbollah fighter in Syria told the New York Times the other day, referring to Israel's withdrawal from Lebanon in the early 1980s. "And we will take Jerusalem."

At the moment, Hezbollah is bogged down in Syria, with thousands of fighters seeking to defeat both the Islamic State group as well as U.S.-backed rebels in order to protect its long-time patron, Syrian strongman Bashar Assad. But the "Party of God" hasn't lost sight of its ultimate prize, which is Israel's destruction.

Nor has Israel lost sight of Hezbollah's growing stockpiles of increasingly sophisticated weapons or its provocative activities on Israel's border, whether from Syria or from its home base in southern Lebanon.

That leaves Hezbollah and Israel, which last fought a full-scale war in 2006, openly preparing for their next one. Their maneuvering is just one more reminder of what's at stake in Syria's horrific civil war, where Iran, Hezbollah and other radical Shiite Muslim forces are investing billions of dollars and thousands of men to ensure that Assad does not fall either to the Islamic State group or to U.S.-backed rebels.

It also highlights the ongoing impact of President Barack Obama's decision to neither push hard for Assad's ouster (after calling for him to step down) nor to strongly support moderate forces after Arab Spring protests erupted in Syria in early 2011. His distaste for significant U.S. involvement empowered Assad to slaughter his own people and, in the mayhem of civil war, it also offered a breeding ground for radical Islamist forces to try to create a new "safe haven" for themselves.

By way of background, Iran and its closest regional ally, Syria, have long funded, armed and directed Hezbollah, enabling the terrorist group to establish a well-stocked military base in southern Lebanon, across Israel's northern border. In fact, Hezbollah is so dependent on Syria that its leader, Hassan Nasrallah, acknowledged in recent days that its survival depends on Assad's survival.

After Israel and Hezbollah squared off in 2006, the United Nations Security Council unanimously adopted Resolution 1701, which prohibited arms transfers to Hezbollah. Iran and Syria ignored the resolution, however, and the Security Council has done nothing to prevent their arms transfers.

Israel badly damaged Hezbollah in the last war, prompting Nasrallah to admit that he wouldn't have provoked it if he had known that Israel would respond so forcefully. But Hezbollah has stepped up its activities on Israel's border in recent months, drawing measured fire from the Jewish state.

In January, for instance, Nasrallah threatened to attack Israel from the north and reportedly followed up with rocket fire at the Israeli-controlled Golan Heights. Later that month, Hezbollah killed two Israeli soldiers and wounded seven others after firing anti-tank missiles at two vehicles of the Israeli Defense Forces. Israel responded with air strikes and artillery fire, killing a United Nations peacekeeper from Spain who was patrolling the Israeli-Lebanese border.

Looking ahead, Israel is working to inoculate itself from the inevitable global condemnation to come if it responds wholeheartedly either to increasing dangerous provocations from Hezbollah or a major cross-border attack.

This month, Israeli military officials revealed maps and aerial footage showing that in the southern Lebanese village of Muhaybib, Hezbollah has, as the New York Times reported, "nine arms depots, five rocket-launching sites, four infantry positions, signs of three underground tunnels, three antitank positions and, in the very center of the village, a Hezbollah command post."

Hezbollah, Israeli officials say, has far more firepower than in 2006, with 100,000 rockets and missiles, thousands of which can reach Tel Aviv. By embedding its rockets and forces within civilian villages, Hezbollah is inviting civilian deaths from Israel's counterattacks on its weapons and forces, much in the way that the terrorist group Hamas does in Gaza by hiding its weapons in schools and mosques.

Israel is likely watching developments in Syria with profoundly mixed emotions. At first blush, it might welcome Assad's fall and, with it, Hezbollah's, thus easing tensions on its northern border.

But, at this point in Syria's civil war, Assad's fall would greatly expand the territorial reach of the Islamic State group, whose brutal fighters could then turn their guns on the Jewish state through the Golan Heights.

In essence, Washington's reticence toward Syria has helped leave Jerusalem with only bad outcomes.

