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Beyond Rhetoric: Hizballah Threats after the Mughniyeh Assassination

By [David Schenker](#)
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In response to the February 12 assassination of chief of operations Imad Mughniyeh, Hizballah has ratcheted up its threats, warnings, and saber rattling. In turn, Israel has locked down its foreign missions, put its military on heightened alert, and deployed Patriot missiles near Haifa. And in Washington, the FBI issued a bulletin to its field offices warning of possible attacks on U.S. soil.

Given Hizballah's secretive nature, it is difficult to assess the group's tactical intentions through the prism of official speeches. Indeed, Hizballah's first public acknowledgment of Mughniyeh's existence came during leader Hassan Nasrallah's eulogy. Nevertheless, precedent suggests that concerns about Hizballah retaliation are well founded.

Background

Days after Mughniyeh was killed by a car bomb in Damascus, Nasrallah addressed a large funeral rally in Beirut via satellite. During his speech, he ranked Mughniyeh among Hizballah's leading martyrs, possessing the stature of former secretary-general Abbas Musawi and cofounder Ragheb Harb. Both Musawi and Harb were killed by Israel, leading Nasrallah to claim that Israel killed Mughniyeh as well. (Israel has denied involvement; interestingly, Mughniyeh's widow has told the Iranian press that the "Syrian traitors are responsible for his death.")

As with the deaths of Musawi and Harb, Nasrallah suggested the "resistance" would not collapse, but rather would "escalate." The much-publicized highlight of Nasrallah's speech was his direct threat of retaliation: "With regard to this killing, considering its date, place, and style, Zionists, if you want this kind of open war, then let the entire world listen. Let it be an open war. We have a sacred right to self-defense and we will do everything this right entitles us to do to defend our country." In another speech a week later, Nasrallah again raised the specter of attacks against Israelis, including those living abroad: "When we speak of the resistance strategy to defend Lebanon, we usually mean one thing, but there is something else: our legitimate self-defense. When we are killed, especially outside the borders of the homeland, we cannot tolerate [it]. . . . We therefore shall defend ourselves the way we choose, at the time and place of our choosing."

Past Threats

Hizballah has a history of following through on its threats, particularly after perceived egregious Israeli military action. A few examples illustrate the point. In February 1992, Israel assassinated Hizballah secretary-general Musawi. At the funeral, Nasrallah vowed revenge. Describing the killing as an Israeli "message" to Hizballah, he noted that "it is not always essential to answer the message immediately. . . . [T]he conflict is a long one." Even while counseling patience, he stated, "We are ready to settle accounts." A month later, on March 17, 1992, the Israeli embassy in Argentina was bombed, killing 29 and wounding 242.

A similar pattern occurred in summer 1994 after Israel kidnapped a former Amal security chief, Mustafa Dirani. Israel took that step for two reasons: because it needed bargaining leverage for future prisoner exchanges with Hizballah, and because Dirani was believed to possess information on the whereabouts of longtime Israeli POW Ron Arad. After the kidnapping, Nasrallah told the Lebanese magazine *al-Watan al-Arabi*, "A thousand suicide commandos are ready to strike Israel all over the world." His deputy, Naim Qassm, also warned via BBC radio that Hizballah had "a longer arm" than Israel. A month later, on July 18, 1994, the Jewish Community Center in Argentina (AMIA) was hit by a massive car bomb that killed 85 and wounded 200. Argentinean authorities have formally accused Hizballah and Iran of responsibility for both the embassy and AMIA attacks.

Developments surrounding Hizballah kidnappings in 2000 -- of three Israeli soldiers and Israeli businessman Elhanan Tannenbaum -- also provide insight into the group's pattern of following up on its threats. In 2004, Hizballah leveraged the return of the three soldiers -- who were killed after their capture -- and Tannenbaum for 400 Palestinian prisoners and 30 Lebanese and other Arab prisoners, including Dirani and senior Hizballah figure Sheikh Abdul Karim Obeid. At a rally celebrating the prisoner swap, Nasrallah lamented Israel's refusal to release Samir Kuntar, the longest held Lebanese prisoner who in 1979 perpetrated perhaps the most infamous terrorist attack against Israel. "Because they did not do that," Nasrallah said, "I assure you that they will regret it in the future."

Hizballah's rhetoric prior to the July 2006 kidnapping of two Israeli soldiers -- which sparked the summer war in Lebanon -- was less definitive, perhaps because the operation was not a response to any particular provocation, or possibly because Nasrallah did not plan on the operation escalating into full-scale war.

Ongoing Military Preparations

Since the end of the 2006 war, Hizballah has been preparing for another confrontation with Israel. Less than six months after the conflict ended, Nasrallah stated that the group had fully rearmed. In May 2007, he told a Dubai television station that Hizballah had "more than twenty thousand rockets," and possibly as many as "eighty thousand." In a report provided to the UN Security Council that same month, Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon reported that Hizballah had tripled its inventory of ground-to-sea missiles, restocked its long-range rockets, and had even established an anti-aircraft unit.

In June 2007, UN special envoy for Lebanon Terje Roed-Larsen gave the Security Council an "alarming and deeply disturbing picture" of "a steady flow of weapons . . . across the border from Syria" to Hizballah. Despite the presence of UN forces in southern Lebanon, these weapons, according to Nasrallah, were being shipped "to the front." More recently, in November 2007, several media reports highlighted Hizballah maneuvers in the south. According to the Lebanese opposition daily *al-Akhbar*, Nasrallah personally supervised those maneuvers.

Meanwhile, press reports indicate that Hizballah has retrenched itself north of the Litani River, beyond the jurisdiction of the mandated UN Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL). According to *Time* magazine reporter Nicholas Blanford, the group has established new security pockets in the mountains north of the Litani, presumably digging in for the next round with Israel.

Conclusion

Even with its military infrastructure reestablished, Hizballah's range of options on Lebanese soil is now constrained by postwar developments. As per UN Resolution 1701, 15,000 UNIFIL troops and an equal number of Lebanese soldiers now patrol Lebanon south of the Litani. Moreover, despite an initial spike in popularity after the so-called "divine victory" in 2006, there are signs that Hizballah's popularity has eroded, in part based on the slow pace of postwar reconstruction, and also as a result of war fatigue. And although many in Lebanon sent Hizballah their condolences after Mughniyeh's death -- including several top leaders in the pro-Western "March 14" political coalition -- many other Lebanese quietly applauded his demise.

Meanwhile, the political crisis in Beirut persists as Hizballah, Syria, and their allies continue to press their interests in the Lebanese presidential elections. At this point, it seems unlikely that another war with Israel would help Hizballah's immediate political ambitions because there is little public support for it.

Given these domestic constraints, it seems more likely that Hizballah would pursue a retaliatory operation abroad. The group has a global network of extremely competent and committed terrorist cells said to be pre-positioned and ready to strike. Israel understands Hizballah's capabilities, and its intelligence officials are already predicting retaliatory strikes after Mughniyeh's forty-day mourning period. Based on Nasrallah and Hizballah's track record, the question is when -- not if -- attacks will occur.

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