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Hizballah's 'Big Surprise' and the Litani Line

By Andrew Exum
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On August 14, the anniversary of the end of last summer's Lebanon war, Hizballah secretary-general Hassan Nasrallah warned Israel of a "big surprise" if it initiated a new conflict in the South. Analysts immediately began speculating over the nature of the promised surprise. But what is most important to note is that Hizballah, a year after its last war, is making serious preparations for the next one.

The Litani Line

The most significant development in southern Lebanon since the end of the 2006 war is Hizballah's construction of a defensive line north of the Litani River. Whereas all territory south of the Litani falls under the jurisdiction of the UN Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL), territory north of the river is off-limits to UNIFIL.

As soon as the war with Israel ended, wealthy Hizballah sympathizers began buying up land north of the Litani -- in historically Christian and Druze areas -- at prices well above the market rate. Much of the Christian village of Chbail, for example, has been bought by the Shiite businessman Ali Tajeddine and repopulated with poor Shiites from the south. Another village just south of the Litani has been built entirely from scratch. Such developments have alarmed other Lebanese communities for purely sectarian reasons. But the construction and repopulation of these villages is almost certainly intended to link the traditionally Shiite villages of the western Bekaa Valley with those of southern Lebanon.

Most of this construction is along a new, Iranian-funded road being built along the Litani's northern edge. Constructed by the "Iranian Organization for Sharing in the Building of Lebanon," the road is as large as any in southern Lebanon and features signs every few hundred meters with slogans such as "In the service of the people of Lebanon."

To be sure, there is nothing implicitly wrong with either the resettlement of impoverished Shiites or the development of large public works projects. But these moves mask a static defensive line that Hizballah intends to use in what it sees as the inevitable sequel to last summer's fight against Israel. Using friendly Shiite-dominated villages as fighting bases was key to Hizballah's successes last summer. The Litani River valley offers Hizballah an opportunity to link these villages with other Shiite villages in the Bekaa Valley.

Why the Litani?

From the perspective of a Hizballah military planner, it is difficult to surmise what strategic objectives Israel might seek to accomplish in the event of another war. Hizballah is left in the awkward position of trying to answer the question of how Israel might fight without knowing why it would fight.

At the moment, the group seems to think that despite Israel's heavy reliance on airpower in the last war -- with ground forces deployed in only a limited fashion -- the next war would begin with a much larger Israeli ground assault. Any attempt to defend the area south of the Litani would therefore be suicidal. Moreover, the

deployment of 12,000 UN peacekeepers and several thousand Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) personnel has made the construction of static defensive lines in southern Lebanon much more difficult than it was before summer 2006. Accordingly, even as Hizballah continues to train village units south of the Litani in the hope that they could slow an Israeli ground invasion, the group has constructed its main defensive positions to the north, where the terrain favors the defender and where Hizballah could deny Israeli armor columns easy access to the Bekaa Valley.

Although Hizballah had ample time to prepare for the last war -- which the group initiated with its decision to kidnap two Israeli soldiers on July 12, 2006 -- the next clash could result from either a wider regional conflict or an Israeli decision to finish the job begun in 2006. Whether or not there is a real danger of a war initiated by either Israel or Syria matters little for the purpose of understanding Hizballah's strategy -- at the moment, the group seems convinced that another war is likely.

Another good reason for Hizballah to build positions north of the Litani is that this approach allows for entrenched positions that can house medium- and long-range missiles. Hizballah successfully launched large numbers of short-range and largely ineffective katyusha rockets into Israel in 2006, but the Israeli air force had knocked out its longer-range and more potent arsenal just a few days into the fighting.

Israeli planners, for their part, have never understood why Hizballah felt the need to launch rockets from such advanced positions in the first place. Launching them from the other side of the Litani -- over the heads of UNIFIL and the LAF -- has the advantage of leaving Hizballah positions unharassed by the initial stages of an Israeli ground invasion. From positions north of the Litani, Hizballah katyushas could comfortably reach major Israeli population centers vulnerable from firing positions along the border (e.g., the 16,000 people in the town of Kiryat Shimona), while its longer-range missiles could reach more distant potential targets such as Haifa and even Tel Aviv.

All along the Iranian-built route north of the Litani, new roads and trails are springing up where once there were only trees and rocks. Where do these roads go, and what is taking place there? It is difficult to tell because many of them have been designated closed "military areas," patrolled by Hizballah gunmen. To longtime Lebanon observers, these areas evoke memories of border zones similarly off-limits between 2000 and 2006, used to great effect by Hizballah as reinforced fighting positions during the summer war.

Nasrallah's Surprise?

Although Hizballah positions north of the Litani might be the "big surprise" Hassan Nasrallah referred to in his August 14 speech, that hardly seems likely. Observers have been taken aback by how overt much of the construction has been -- very unlike Hizballah, an organization famous for its secrecy. Perhaps these positions are being constructed as decoys in the same way that others were constructed for this purpose between 2000 and 2006. Or, as some have argued, maybe these construction projects are just a way to keep Hizballah's gunmen busy while the real fight -- the political one -- takes place to the north, in Beirut. Most likely, though, Hizballah -- which remains a disciplined fighting force -- is motivated by a genuine sense of urgency, unsure when the next round of fighting will begin and concerned that its pre-2006 defenses would be insufficient against a massed Israeli ground invasion (and too difficult to reconstruct with UNIFIL in the way).

There is speculation that Nasrallah's "surprise" would be the inclusion of anti-aircraft capabilities in the next round of fighting, a move Hizballah hopes would break Israel's air superiority and enable it to fight on a more fluid battlefield. For U.S. observers, however, the source of continued fascination remains Hizballah's transformation from the world's finest guerrilla army into a force that, in 2006 and today, seems quite comfortable in conventional fighting as well.

Andrew Exum, a Washington Institute Soref fellow, recently returned from a trip to southern Lebanon.

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