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Will Foreign Interests Drag Lebanon into a Military Conflict?

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The recent threats by Ali Larijani, chairman of the Iranian parliament and a member of the Iranian leader's innermost circle, that a military attack by the West, headed by the United States, against its Syrian ally would lead to an attack on Israel are another stage in Iran's efforts to deter the US and Israel from undertaking military action against it. Although Iran's actual willingness to come to the help of its allies and protégés cannot be assessed, it seems that the key tools available to it are its proxies, especially the Lebanese Hizbollah. Hizbollah, which under Iran's watchful eye maintains close strategic cooperation with President Bashar Assad, now subject to sharp inter-Arab and international criticism for his brutal repression of the Syrian people, publicly announced its support for the Syrian regime and, implicitly, for its acts of repression as well. Therefore, should its patron Iran decide to act on Larijani's threat, Hizbollah will be directed to act on behalf of Iran and Syria against its enemies, including Israel. This supposition has gained credence in recent days due to threats made by Nasrallah against Syrian opposition elements, following the abduction of several Shiites in Damascus. Even earlier, in speeches in May 2012 marking the reconstruction of the Dahiya neighborhood and the IDF withdrawal from Lebanon 12 years ago, Nasrallah boasted of Hizbollah's rocket stockpile and the organization's ability to reach every point in Israel, including Tel Aviv.

According to the assessment of Israeli security officials, Hizbollah currently has an organized army of more than 10,000 soldiers and some 60,000 rockets of various ranges, capable of causing more damage and greater precision than the rockets it possessed during the Second Lebanon War. Moreover, the organization has deployed its forces in towns and some 160 Shiite village in southern Lebanon, north of the Litani River, and in the Beqaa Valley, while making use of residents' homes as battle fortifications. Rockets are stored in

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the basement; a family lives above the rockets, the third level serves as a command post, and the fourth level houses another family.

Despite Hizbollah's aggressive rhetoric and its ongoing preparations for a military conflict with Israel, most Lebanese are loath to engage in another round of violence, because of Israel's full and internationally recognized withdrawal from Lebanon and because of the heavy economic and physical cost they had to pay as a result of the Second Lebanon War into which they were dragged by Hizbollah against their wishes. Another confrontation between Hizbollah and Israel where the organization taps its extensive missile arsenal would likely cause much damage in Israel. However, the Israeli response would entail much greater damage to Lebanon, including the destruction not only of targets directly associated with Hizbollah. Senior Israeli officials have publicly made this clear to the Lebanese government, in which Hizbollah is a central element. The Lebanese know that another round of fighting would also inflict a severe blow to its economy, based chiefly on a developed banking system, foreign investments, and tourism, and would undermine the country's already shaky political stability.

In addition to existing differences of opinion between the various political factions, including within the unstable coalition comprising the current Lebanese government, the intra-Syrian fighting has sparked tension between the Sunnis, who identify with the opposition, and Hizbollah and the Shiites supporting Assad's regime. This was evident in the recent riots in Tripoli after two Sunni clergymen were killed by Lebanese forces. Representatives of the Sunni community made harsh accusations against the Lebanese army for having allowed Hizbollah operatives into its ranks.

In addition, despite Hizbollah's growing political and military strength, the organization suffers from a serious image problem in Lebanon: the unequivocal findings by the international Special Tribunal for Lebanon that senior Hizbollah agents were directly responsible for the murder of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri, and other attempts by the organization to assassinate political rivals in Lebanon have tainted its image. Furthermore, the organization's support for and cooperation with the Assad regime are, in the Lebanese street, proof of the organization's hypocrisy: an organization that supported and encouraged the Arab Spring is now publicly unmasked as a subcontractor for foreign interests, opposed to the interests of both Lebanese and Arabs alike. These and other factors underpin the Lebanese fears of another round of violence, liable to drag the country into a devastating war because of interests of the Iranian Shiite regime and the Syrian Alawite regime, engaged in slaughtering its own citizens. It is clear that given the nature of Hizbollah deployment in populated areas, in case of a military conflict civilians will sustain much of the fire from Israel; this was reiterated recently GOC Northern

Command Maj. Gen. Yair Golan in a speech at a conference marking the sixth anniversary of the Second Lebanon War.

Despite the Lebanese civilians' reservations and the prevailing assessment in Israel that Hizbollah is not eager to put its military strength to the test because of the expected cost in casualties, infrastructures, and assets, it may be that because of the organization's great dependence on Iran and the direct involvement of Revolutionary Guards in Lebanon in Hizbollah activities Nasrallah may not have much room to maneuver and will be forced to heed Tehran's instructions to act against Israel for the sake of Iranian or Syrian interests. Thus, although Nasrallah admitted after the Second Lebanon War that he had not foreseen Israel's severe reaction, he may again drag the entire region into a military conflict whose results, as is underscored by senior Israeli officials, may be expected to be far more destructive to Lebanon and the Lebanese. Therefore, the question remains whether this time Nasrallah, who erred previously in his assessment, will knowingly drag Lebanon and his organization into political and economic suicide. The answer may be that the fate of the Lebanese people is no longer in the organization's control, and its national interests may have already been sacrificed to those of foreign nations.

