



INSS Insight No. 529, March 19, 2014

**Hizbollah's Political and Security Situation:
Existing and Emerging Challenges
Benedetta Berti and Yoram Schweitzer**

Since the beginning of the bloody civil war in Syria three years ago, Hizbollah's political and security environment has grown far more complex, with the Lebanese Shiite organization involved in a prolonged civil war that has strong regional implications, and with its status within Lebanon increasingly contested. Thus while Hizbollah remains the single most powerful military organization in Lebanon, both its freedom of action and its capacity to project power have been constrained. Currently, Hizbollah must deal with challenges at both the domestic and regional levels.

Within Lebanon, Hizbollah is grappling with a prolonged period of instability, with the country ever-more polarized between pro-and anti-Bashar al-Assad supporters. Adding to the complexity of the situation is the pressure on Lebanon caused by the steady influx of Syrian refugees, numbering one million by late 2013 – more than 20 percent of Lebanon's total population – a number expected to rise to 1.5 million by the end of 2014.

In this fragile context, Hizbollah, much like the other main political parties, had an interest in ending the eleven-month political vacuum during which the country had no sitting government. The situation ended in mid-February 2014, when the designated prime minister, Tammam Salam, finally broke the impasse and announced the formation of a national unity executive cabinet based on controversial 8-8-8 formula, whereby both the March 14 and the Hizbollah-led March 8 movements would be awarded eight ministerial posts, with the remaining eight seats assigned by the Prime Minister along with President Suleiman. The deal required all parties, including Hizbollah, to make compromises, for example by allowing key ministerial posts – including defense, justice, and interior – to go to the March 14 camp.

Still, Hizbollah has not taken a substantial risk by approving the new cabinet, as it seems that each coalition will de facto hold veto power, thus making sure no significant national decision is adopted without its consent. This is important to Hizbollah, as the government needs to take a number of crucial decisions in the next months, including decisions relating to the presidential elections, scheduled for the spring of 2014, and reforming the

electoral law in preparation for the November 2014 parliamentary elections. In addition, the government must deal with the rising internal violence, Hizbollah's involvement in the Syrian civil war, and cooperation with the UN Special Tribunal for Lebanon, which finally opened its trial on January 16, 2014.

Since the establishment of the cabinet, Hizbollah's actions have made clear that the group's willingness to make compromises does not involve conceding control of its weapons, nor does it involve backing down from its involvement in Syria. Hizbollah has reiterated these points in cabinet discussions concerning the crafting of a joint programmatic statement, and – in what can be only described as hard bargaining against its political foes – insisted on inserting a clause that would endorse the “resistance.” It was, however, forced to yield on inserting a reference to its “tripartite formula” (the army, the people, the resistance) and settle instead for a more vague endorsement of the right of each citizen to “resist the Israeli occupation.” Similarly, Hizbollah has recently been highly critical of President Suleiman's calls to preserve the *Babda Declaration*, a document aimed at keeping Lebanon neutral in the context of ongoing regional conflicts in general and the Syrian civil war in particular.

What is more, the new government represents an opportunity for Hizbollah to press its political adversaries to collaborate in dealing with what the organization has called the “takfiri” challenge, namely, the rise of Salafi-jihadist groups operating from within Lebanon. Hizbollah Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah said so himself during a long speech delivered on “Martyrs Day” commemorating the death of prominent Hizbollah figures. Nasrallah referred to the danger posed by rising takfiri groups operating in Syria and Lebanon, warning of these groups being used by Israel and other “Arab supporters” (a reference to Saudi Arabia) to sow strife and division.

Going beyond the predictable rhetoric, Hizbollah's troubles with local violent Salafist factions are indeed not just political. In the past twelve months there has been a steady rise of violent attacks against Hizbollah, including the assassination of high level officer and military commander Hassan al-Laquis, as well a number of terrorist attacks against Iranian targets, such as the Iranian Embassy in Beirut, and Hizbollah strongholds, such as the Dahiye quarter in southern Beirut.

While at the military level there is little doubt that Hizbollah is far better organized, equipped, and established than its jihadist counterparties, the rising number of violent acts perpetrated against Hizbollah and its Shiite constituency indicate the larger political fallout stemming from the group's involvement in the Syrian civil war, as well as the underlining erosion of the group's reputation of “invincibility.” To respond to this domestic threat, Hizbollah must increase the monitoring and surveillance of its strongholds, while highlighting its involvement and presence in its communities. These measures are important to preserve prestige and credibility within the Shiite community,

and to convince ardent supporters that it can defend them and minimize the backlash they suffer because of Hizbollah's policy in Syria.

In dealing with the violent attacks, Hizbollah has also sought the cooperation of Lebanon's security sector. Such assistance is meaningful from an operational standpoint as well as from a political one, as it is important to Hizbollah to make sure the attacks against them and their community are perceived as national terror threats and not as counterattacks addressed specifically to Hizbollah and thus exclusively its own problem.

In addition, Hizbollah's domestic challenges are complicated by its extensive involvement in Syria, where the organization has been drawn deeply into the conflict becoming, through its active involvement in both offensive and defensive operations, a crucial force multiplier for the Assad regime. In other words, regarding Syria Hizbollah is currently "all in," and it seems rather unlikely this will change in the immediate future. In turn, these strategic considerations would help explain why it is in the organization's interest both to preserve a basic level of calm within Lebanon and prevent or at least postpone an escalation of the current tensions with its arch enemy, Israel.

Yet on this point Hizbollah has recently found itself in an uneasy predicament, as while the organization has been able to look the other way following alleged Israeli operations against Hizbollah-bound transfers of weapons on Syria territory, the cost of taking the same stance with respect to the alleged February 24, 2014 Israeli attack against Hizbollah on Lebanese soil would, in the long term, be much higher. For an organization built around "resistance" to Israel, repeatedly ignoring Israeli operations in Lebanon could further jeopardize the group's credibility, thus creating a dangerous and highly inflammable situation.

In this context, in the past three weeks there have been at least four different cross-border rocket and roadside bomb attacks occurring in both the Golan Heights and the Mount Dov area, the most serious of which occurred yesterday, March 18, 2014. In all cases Hizbollah has appeared as a possible perpetrator, thereby attempting to polish its reputation as leader of the national resistance and "defender of Lebanon" against Israeli aggression, while also trying to avoid a full military escalation occurring within Lebanon. By targeting Israel through the Golan, Hizbollah can signal to Israel that the group is capable of stirring up trouble at Israel's borders through Syria without extending the battlefield into Lebanon. In this context it is important for Israel to keep in mind its interest in not becoming dragged into the civil war in Syria or mired in the domestic instability in Lebanon. As such Israel would do well to try to prevent escalation and keep any military response limited and focused.