

Viewpoints
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Hizbullah's Roll of the Dice in South Lebanon

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The EU designated the "military" wing of Hizbullah as a terrorist organization, inviting strong reaction from Hizbullah describing it as a "legal cover for Israel to attack" Lebanon. The party is using the decision to intimidate UNIFIL forces in South Lebanon through the use of its local elected officials and the population. Hizbullah needs UNIFIL more than ever to keep the calm in the South while fighting in Syria. The threats to UNIFIL should not prevent the UN force from doing its work. While the attacks by Hizbullah's supporters on the UNIFIL forces might increase, the last thing Hizbullah and the people of the South need now is another war with Israel. This is the best guarantee for the safety of UNIFIL.

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The European Union, after a long and hard debate, decided on July 22 to designate the military wing of Hizbullah as a terrorist organization. This set a two-track policy: one to isolate the military wing of Hizbullah, and the other to continue dialogue with the political Hizbullah. The 28-member organization insisted that its decision was a “political message” that rejects terrorism on European territory by Hizbullah. But the party, while decrying the decision as a result of “American and Zionist pressure,” knew that it has more to do with its fight in Syria on the side of the Syrian regime than with its conflict with Israel. Regardless of the motivation, the decision opens a new phase in the relationship between the Europeans and Hizbullah, and it will have implications on the situation in South Lebanon and the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) stationed there.

Members of the EU, some of whom voted for the decision reluctantly, have concerns about the impact of the decision on Lebanon. They worry about the stability of Lebanon, their influence in the country, and above all the security of their troops in UNIFIL, which was tasked by the UN Security Council with the implementation of resolution 1701 in South Lebanon after the 2006 war that ended hostilities between Hizbullah and Israel. These concerns led the organization to accompany its decision with an assurance that it “does not prevent the continuation of dialogue with all political parties in Lebanon and does not affect the delivery of assistance to Lebanon.” The EU representatives in Lebanon went to great lengths to affirm that the EU is continuing its dialogue with Hizbullah and that it considers the party an important component of political life of the country. This differentiation between a military and a political wing was received with ridicule and rejection by the party as well as by its archenemy Israel.

Hizbullah officials insist that there is only one party and the European differentiation is a “fabrication” and an “invention.” Israeli President Shimon Peres described it as “hypocrisy” on the part of the Europeans to make such a distinction.

But while denying the split between a political and a military wing, the reaction of the party to the designation had the same duality: attacking the decision as an “aggression” and a “declaration of war” and “not worth the ink it was pinned in,” while at the same time meeting the European ambassadors and envoys and assuring them that Hizbullah will not boycott Europe over their decision.

The Secretary General of the party, Sheikh Hassan Nasrallah, head of both the “political and military wings,” while ridiculing the decision and dismissing it as “worthless,” warned the European countries that they are giving Israel a legal cover for “any war on Lebanon.” These countries, he declared, are making themselves “a full partner in any Israeli aggression on Lebanon.”

The Europeans went out of their way to calm Hizbullah after their decision. They sent public and private messages to assure the party of their continued engagement with its political wing. The EU Ambassador to Lebanon, Angelina Eichhorst, made the rounds, visiting government and Hizbullah officials. She repeated the same message that this decision only targeted the military wing, defining it as the “Jihadi Council” and the “external Security Committee” of the party. With her Hizbullah hosts, Ammar Mousawi, head of foreign relations for the party, and former Minister of Energy Mohammad Fneish, Eichhorst drew a distinction between “terrorism

and the right to defend a country against occupation.” The ambassador said all the right things for her Hizbullah hosts, from offering that the decision “is not a justification for any Israeli attack on Lebanon” to supporting the participation of Hizbullah in Lebanon’s cabinet. But Nasrallah’s declaration that he will put forward members of his military wing to the future Lebanese cabinet made the job of the ambassador more difficult.

But Mousawi, according to press accounts, warned the EU envoy of “consequences” for the decision. He reportedly asked the EU ambassador, “What if the military wing of Hizbullah decided not to cooperate with the UNIFIL?”

This question goes to the heart of the EU fears over the implications of its decision and Mousawi knew it and used that fear to intimidate his guest. The fate of the EU soldiers who represent 33 percent of the UNIFIL forces in South Lebanon, Hizbullah’s strong hold, was high on every European official’s mind when they voted to designate its “military” wing as such. The concern that their soldiers might come under attack, once again, or could become hostages in the Hizbullah-controlled region explains the EU’s desire to keep its open door policy with Hizbullah as a political party.

The UNIFIL leadership’s strategy to counter any Hizbullah reaction was to draw a line of distinction between the UN force and the EU, though unconvincingly. They explained that the UN force has nothing to do with the EU decision because the participating soldiers are there under the UN flag and do not represent their national countries. This was always the case and still European soldiers came under attack because of unhappiness with the policies of European countries. The attacks in previous years on the Spanish and French contingents targeted them though they were under the UN flag then, as now.

It is very clear that none of the actors in South Lebanon want a change in the status quo in the South or in the rules of engagement. Shi’a Watch, a Lebanese blog, reported that during the meetings with the EU envoy, and in a reversal of roles, Lebanese officials were more concerned about the impact of the EU decision on UNIFIL than the EU representatives. They cited as an example the visit of the head of General Security in Lebanon (“a state apparatus fully controlled by Hizbullah,” the blog said) to the UNIFIL headquarters in the South to deliver a conciliatory message just a day after the EU decision.

Observers of the UN force in Beirut argue that it is not in Lebanon’s interest, but more importantly not in Hizbullah’s interest, to have a fight with UNIFIL or to do anything that might drive EU countries to pull their troops out of the UN force. Hizbullah is busy fighting in Syria and would prefer to keep the South, and its reservoir of fighters, quiet so it can focus on the Syria front. Timur Goksel, the Turkish editor of Al-Monitor and former spokesman for UNIFIL for years, said, “Hizbullah has nothing to gain by being hostile to UNIFIL,” implying that the party might have given assurances to the EU about the safety of their troops after the decision. This would not be new. When the UNIFIL forces were expanded to implement resolution 1701, there were reports that some European countries sought and got assurances from Hizbullah about the safety of their soldiers before they agreed to send troops to South Lebanon. But despite the assurances in the past, the UNIFIL forces faced difficult times in South Lebanon with attacks killing and injuring soldiers, including Europeans. The last two years have been surprisingly quiet, with economic benefits for the South, but the new decision ushers a new unknown phase fraught with fragility and uncertainty for the UN force.

Although UNIFIL spokesmen deny that they felt threatened or that they increased security, people on the ground tell a different story. A source close to the UN revealed that a day after the EU decision, a statement was distributed in the South that threatened UNIFIL forces. It called on the French, Spanish, and Italian forces, while naming their bases and the villages they are located in, “to withdraw from the South within a month, from the date of the adoption of the EU decision, or they would be dealt with as an occupying power.” The statement warned, “We do what we say.” It was signed the Jabal Amel (the name for Shiite South Lebanon) Brigade press office.

The other threat to UNIFIL comes from the local population. There is a possibility that the UN force could become a token force there without the ability to do its work if it cannot work with the people of the region. Since the EU decision, many mayors and *mukhtars* (local elected representatives of villages) announced that they will not receive or meet the UNIFIL officials anymore, curtailing their work and isolating them. Most of these elected officials are either Hezbollah or Amal (the other Shiite party headed by Speaker Nabih Berri) officials. Some of these officials retracted their threats later, but there is no guarantee this will not continue under the behest of Hezbollah.

Moreover, the UNIFIL force patrols are accompanied by Lebanese army forces, but because of the security situation in other parts of Lebanon, the army had to pull some of its forces to use in different parts of the country. A UN expert said UNIFIL has 250-300 patrols a day, but now the army cannot accompany more than 10 percent of these patrols, which makes it difficult for UNIFIL to go out alone in a hostile environment where people are angry over the EU decision. This might lead to fewer UNIFIL patrols and hence impact the effectiveness of the forces in South Lebanon.

The relationship between UNIFIL and the local population while “good,” suffered episodes of violence. Angry residents were suspicious of the UN force because soldiers took photos or searched their villages. This was reportedly instigated by Hezbollah.

Observers in the South are worried and expect an increase in these attacks by the local population on UNIFIL. Hezbollah officials and their media are trying to distance themselves from any future attack on the UN force by saying any third party can now attack UNIFIL and accuse Hezbollah. But the rhetoric of Hezbollah’s Secretary General Nasrallah and his officials is akin to incitement of the local population to resume their attacks on the UN force. This could be Hezbollah’s new strategy: intimidating UNIFIL to prevent it from doing its work while keeping it there in check in order to keep the status quo and calm in the South. This would Hezbollah to free its hand and continue its war in Syria. Hezbollah does not want to fight on two fronts: South Lebanon and in Syrian cities.

South Lebanon will be back in the news while Hezbollah holds the EU decision as a sword above the head of the UNIFIL-participating countries. But UNIFIL cannot be intimidated by Hezbollah and its local supporters in the South to stop doing its job. Hezbollah needs UNIFIL there more than they need its guarantees. The last thing the party and the people in the South need now is a new war with Israel.



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